

# YOUTH & POLICY

**No. 106 MAY 2011**

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## **Published by**

Youth & Policy, 'Burnbrae', Black Lane, Blaydon Burn, Blaydon on Tyne NE21 6DX.

**[www.youthandpolicy.org](http://www.youthandpolicy.org)**

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## About *Youth & Policy*

*Youth and Policy* Journal was founded in 1982 to offer a critical space for the discussion of youth policy and youth work theory and practice.

The editorial group have subsequently expanded activities to include the organisation of related conferences, research and book publication. Regular activities include the bi-annual 'History of Community and Youth Work' and the 'Thinking Seriously' conferences.

The *Youth and Policy* editorial group works in partnership with a range of local and national voluntary and statutory organisations who have complementary purposes. These have included UK Youth, YMCA, Muslim Youth Council and Durham University.

All members of the *Youth and Policy* editorial group are involved in education, professional practice and research in the field of informal education, community work and youth work. The journal is run on a not-for-profit basis. Editors and Associate Editors all work in a voluntary and unpaid capacity.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Running Out of Options: Re-Modelling Youth Work

Tony Jeffs

**T**HE WOEFULLY inadequate attempts of the chief executives of arguably the three leading youth work organisations to make the case for youth work before a Parliamentary Committee last month may prove something of a watershed.<sup>1</sup> Given that the committee chair felt obliged to upbraid them for failing to make ‘a fist of it’ their impoverished efforts must produce a backwash of sorts. Coming at a time when youth work projects, both statutory and voluntary, are being threatened with closure, or at best retrenchment, on a scale not witnessed for over fifty years, this feeble performance has perhaps acquired an exaggerated significance; one it would not have been bequeathed even a few months ago. A great deal of almost certainly, misguided faith was invested in the capacity of the House of Commons Committee to arrest and even reverse the decline in public spending on youth services. One has to say misguided because such hopes were founded upon a quaint 1950s reading of our constitution. A belief that such committees can influence the policy decisions of the executive is a relic of a bygone age when the sort of ministerial responsibility conjured up by the words ‘Crichel Down’ existed.<sup>2</sup>

Inevitably a youth worker in Barnsley, Barking or Barnstaple struggling to keep their project afloat may with good grounds shrug their shoulders and wonder what the fuss is about. Especially those who have been around for any length of time and will therefore be painfully aware that the poor quality of youth work managers has been a running scandal for decades. They, if they can be bothered, will probably whisper in your ear ‘what did you expect’ before heading into the night. Apathy is after all a perfectly rational response to events one cannot influence. Therefore why bother oneself about the meeting of a committee that on past evidence will produce a report that will achieve little or nothing? My answer to that question is that the consequences of that failure to present a coherent case for investing in informal education with young people will eventually have an impact on youth work – at all levels: that it will, and already has, led to responses some of which may make a bad situation worse. Think for a moment about the way in which a failure to undertake some routine safety checks on a set of points on a railway line north of London led to a fatal crash, the bankruptcy of the employing company and the re-organisation of the railway system. Consider how the incompetence, even cowardice, of a few individual practitioners preceded the neglect and killing of a young girl in a London borough. That tragedy resulted in ministerial panic, the publication of an abysmal report which justified ever-greater bureaucratic micro-management of

social workers and an ill-considered and hurried re-organisation of services for children and young people. Mathematicians, sociologists and others look to something called ‘chaos theory’ to partially explain the ways in which dynamic systems become highly sensitive to seemingly inconsequential events. Leaving aside the valid point that a fatal train crash or the killing of a young child are far more serious occurrences than a failure to provide a group of politicians with the sort of answers they want to hear, parallels between the three events do exist. Notably, seemingly minor or trivial over-sights or errors that at another time have minimal or no impact, can on other occasions have a profound long term influence. This disproportionality is far more likely to occur when the given organisation or structure is in an unstable and dysfunctional condition – as youth work is currently.

So what has been the immediate outcome of the failure on the part of the chief executives ‘to make a fist’ of explaining the value of youth work? First and foremost it has fuelled a frantic search to provide evidence that youth work works, to assemble a portfolio of research findings that it has a quantifiable beneficial economic and social impact; in MBA speak that it delivers positive outcomes for young people and the economy. At one level such evidence has been in existence for around two centuries. For example, ever since Sarah Trimmer described for her readers the benefits of Sunday Schools, or Thomas Pole presented to his fellow citizens the case for investing in adult education, a succession of academics, practitioners and social reformers have endeavoured to provide evidence that informal education, whether with adults or young people, can achieve virtuous results. Abundant evidence, of admittedly variable quality, that youth work works, is readily available. The fact that some practitioners, high and low, as well as some policy-makers are unaware of it is inexcusable, but their ignorance does not constitute a valid argument for producing more. Nor does the fact that individuals who should have made the effort to discover for themselves such evidence but did not do so suffice as a justification for accusing others of failing to ‘disseminate’ such findings. Excuses of this ilk too readily trip off the tongue and they need to be to be faced down by practitioners and academics. For too long those who spend public money and who run companies and voluntary organisations have, when it suits their purpose, claimed nobody told them about the evidence. In this instance if the politicians do not know whether informal education with young people is worthwhile, one must legitimately ask why they have been spending public money on it for more than ninety years.

Evidence pointing towards a conclusion that youth work works is plentiful. Yet it must be admitted there is some, less plentiful, that shows it to be ineffective and even harmful. Such inconsistencies are to be expected for the worth or impact of any educational intervention cannot be registered with unerring accuracy on a spreadsheet. This reflects not a failure on the part of the social sciences but the limitations of the spreadsheet. Of course some pieces of research are better than others and there exist ways in which judgements regarding the quality of a given piece can be arrived at. Although anyone who claims to know what these are will invariably find their judgement questioned – and

rightly so. The problem with respect to youth work and informal education, and much more besides, is that ultimately the variables are simply too numerous for any definitive answer to be offered to a question such as – does youth work work; or does adult education work; or is X a better youth worker than Y?

As the following scenario illustrates, the complexity of variables mean there are insurmountable limitations to what research can tell us. A youth worker talks to a young person about whether or not they should go to university. Her friends listen to the conversation but say nothing. She says good night and three days later makes her decision. Was it the right decision? Even the young person will probably not know the answer to that question for decades, if ever. Was it something the youth worker said that led to the right or wrong decision being made – again it is a question that cannot be answered with any meaningful certainty. Can you measure the value of that ‘intervention’ – of course not. Can you assess the impact of what was said during that conversation upon the silent – perhaps unknown listeners? Again impossible even though for one of them what they overheard might have led to a life changing alteration in their behaviour. No research model can answer those questions. The answers lie beyond the purview of the social sciences. This means that ultimately, all educational interventions, formal or informal, are acts of faith; that all we can hold onto is a belief that the liberation of the individual and the creation of a good society require an unstinting investment in education formal and informal, or as Nussbaum put it ‘knowledge is no guarantee of good behaviour, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behaviour’ (2010: 81).

As a consequence, attempts to prove a beneficial impact in the crude and reductive fashion beloved by recent governments are naive at best, and fraudulent at worst. Of course more research in relation to youth work and informal education practice may be helpful but it will not help us overcome the present difficulties. Indeed it is likely to be a distraction and in some cases a profound waste of money. For the short-term contract culture that rewards those who make extravagant claims and dishonest promises applies to those who bid for research contracts as much as to those bidding for youth work contracts. A youth work organisation facing bankruptcy or staff redundancies will, as we all know but rarely admit in the presence of outsiders, promise to deliver almost anything to keep going. Like the thieves who promised King Henry that if he delayed their execution by a year they would teach his favourite horse to talk – they have nothing to lose. For who knows – the king might die, the horse might die or the horse might talk. It is a perversion of the purposes of research to pretend one can answer some questions via research and amongst these are those raised earlier concerning the value or otherwise of youth work. Like the thieves, universities and consultants nowadays to stay in business make promises to deliver answers and solutions they cannot hope to meet. It is self-delusional to imagine that all that is needed in order to prevent a bad situation getting worse is to garner more evidence. Before we start waiting for that bus to arrive it would be far wiser to make a decision as to where we want to go.



Informal education with young people (and therefore youth work) is about offering young people opportunities for meaningful contact with wise, virtuous, mature and well-educated adults. Adults able to teach the immature via dialogue and example – it is that basic. Public schools employ house masters and mistresses, and elite universities college tutors to perform precisely those roles. Now I, and I am sure many colleagues, accept that those who have been denied all but the most rudimentary education may have to be persuaded that informal education as opposed to the examination and skill driven version is important. That goes with the job, along with encouraging some parents to support their children’s educational aspirations; or convincing young people that although they may think school is ‘rubbish’ that learning is not. But what sticks in the craw is that amongst those baying for hard evidence that ‘youth work works’ are privileged individuals who have benefited from sustained contact, often over many years, with a wise and mature house master or mistress or college tutor; who it goes without saying, would never envisage such roles being occupied by short-term contract workers or rewarded via a payment by results system. They know from their own experiences that all that is taught and learnt cannot be measured. That is why they are willing to spend so much sending their own children to public schools and elite universities. Therefore it is legitimate to ask the question why they seek to deny those less privileged than themselves an opportunity to access a cut-price version of the informal education they enjoyed. If it is because they think those less rich than themselves must be denied anything but the thinnest educational gruel then they must say so; if it is in order to reduce their tax bill again they must say so; if it is to prevent the off-spring of the poor getting the jobs they think are the birth-right of their own children again they must say so.

In a slightly amended form these same questions need to be asked of high-paid public sector managers who rant on about ‘evidence based practice’ and ‘show me that informal education is important’ then spend a small fortune on activities, holidays, coaching and even counselling for their own children. The spending patterns of the rich and the managerial class provide all the evidence one needs that informal education and youth provision are important – much as a day wandering around a top public school or five minutes looking at the notice board of an Oxford college will do. Demands for evidence that such things are important for the less well-off members of our society carry more than a strong whiff of hypocrisy with them. The more generously inclined amongst us might view them as just a smoke-screen, a diversionary tactic. Whatever the judgement, those of us who cherish such things and believe in the liberatory potential of informal education, would be well advised to dismiss them as such.

If only the solution to youth work’s current problems was as straightforward as providing more evidence that ‘youth work works’, or to give it a new image and brand; or employ better fund-raisers; or invest more in management training. Then there would be little to worry about. Sadly the problem is more acute; far more deep rooted, emanating as it does from a long standing absence of clarity regarding purpose. Let me explain.

The current crisis concerning youth work actually has little to do with reductions in youth work budgets or local government cuts. They are symptoms of our troubles; not the cause. In reality the present 'round of cuts' have merely accelerated a process of decline that has been observable for over four decades. Local authority youth services were the product of a war-time crisis with regards to the management of young people during five years of aerial bombardment and total warfare, a time when the conscription of those of working-age into either the labour force or military led to a real and present danger, whereby a failure to manage and supervise the leisure time of young people could have serious repercussions upon the war effort. Local authority youth services were hastily constructed to ensure those risks were reduced to the minimum. It was always the intention of central government, as documents published at the time confirm, that come peace-time responsibility for the provision of informal education and leisure activities for young people would transfer to a national network of County Colleges. These purpose-built units were to provide formal day-release education for one of two days per week for the ninety-plus per cent of young people who left school at 14 and entered employment. Schools via after-school-clubs and sports teams, and universities via student unions, would cater for the minority remaining in full-time education. This left voluntary and faith-based youth organisations to operate on the fringes either supplementing the provision offered in the County Colleges, or by making available to a minority who sought it, a faith-or community-based alternative.

A post-war financial crisis linked to the continuation of high levels of military spending as a result of the Korean War and the Cold War, meant that the plan to build a network of County Colleges was first delayed then quietly discarded. Also postponed were plans to raise the school-leaving age first to 15 and then 16, which meant schools were unable to fill the gap. Eventually this policy vacuum was filled in 1959 by the re-invigoration of a by now largely moribund local authority youth sector. Wiser local authority heads knew this was not going to be a long term solution. Increasing affluence amongst teenagers was already stimulating the expansion of commercial provision on an unprecedented scale and this, along with the raising-of-the-school-leaving age, meant that youth clubs were unlikely to have a long term future. Instead these visionaries opted to invest in school-based provision, all-age leisure centres and community schools equipped with high quality facilities designed to cater for the youngest to the oldest members of the community. Those LEAs that slavishly followed the government guidelines post-1959 fairly soon found themselves lumbered with semi-redundant Albemarle youth centres that with each passing year fewer and fewer young people opted to attend and which too many newly qualified youth workers did not wish to work in. By the late 1970s the large municipal youth club was becoming as much a tradition from a bygone age as the Music Hall. By the 1990s when approaching 90 per cent of 18 year olds were still in some form of full-time education as were over 40 per cent of 20 year olds, and social networking sites and home entertainment were available to the overwhelming majority the local authority youth service itself was fast becoming a relic in need of de-commissioning. Without youth centres to run and a substantial voluntary sector to 'advise'

it soon became a bureaucratic husk that filled the time of too many staff with meetings and paper-chasing. In some localities detached youth work, although seriously under-funded, retained an important role but in most areas it had no discernible presence. A small number of building-based projects flourished by lowering the age range of their clientele, a few diversified into counselling, advice services and provision focussed on young people with specialised needs, but these were exceptions. In some areas youth workers re-located into schools, a natural shift given that that was where the young people were now to be found. However the introduction of the national curriculum, the growing obsession with league table status on the part of 'leadership teams', the anti-intellectual ethos pervading most schools and the penchant for transforming school-buildings into unsightly fortresses meant these became places that informal and adult educators were unable to comfortably operate within.

The consequences of all these structural changes has been wholesale demoralisation amongst front-line staff and the emergence of an environment that meant youth workers found it increasingly difficult to foster the type of relationships that enabled youth work to flourish. Workers departed in droves from the local authority sector and those who remained felt increasingly despondent and under-valued. Secret gardens remained wherein creative and sustained relationships with young people might be nurtured, but these thrived largely in spite of not as a result of the over-arching organisational structures and funding mechanisms. The contagion spread and what was initially a problem predominately located within the statutory sector was starting to proliferate within the voluntary sector.

By 2000 the number of youth workers employed by faith-based organisations for the first time since the 1930s began year-on-year to outstrip the total affiliated to local authorities. Leaving aside the issue of what proportion of the faith-based workforce did or did not meet the expectations laid upon them by their employers they at least had a *modus operandi* – to bring young people to a faith. These workers largely believed in what they were doing and although they might have differences with their employers regarding elements of practice, uniquely both parties spoke a common language and shared similar aspirations. This was no longer the case within the local authority and large swathes of the voluntary sector. During the last two decades driven by an increasing desperation for income their business has become touting for business. Bidding left and right for contracts and funding that inevitably carried with it an obligation to deliver what others wanted, rarely what either young people or face-to-face workers wanted. Financial imperatives gradually leached out educational ones. The unrelenting search for funding eclipsed values of public service and replaced them with a servile willingness to do the bidding of state and corporate agencies seeking to narrow the consumer horizons of young people. Youth work was not created to serve the narrow ambitions of big business and lift their profit margins; therefore it is ethically embarrassing to see statutory and voluntary youth organisations demeaning themselves by doing so.

## Where now?

### So where do we go from here?

A post-statutory youth work era has arrived. The remnants cannot be secured and much that lingers is not worth resuscitating even if that were possible. The implications of this paradigm shift are far-reaching. Let us briefly consider three. First what sort of services should be prioritised in the future and how might these best be provided? This question might, for example, prompt individuals and groups to ask – how can a needs rather than funding led youth work be created? How can effective detached work be provided in areas where it is required but where the historic funding is unavailable? How might space be created in which emancipatory informal education can be offered to young people as an alternative to pre-packed skills training and narrowly focussed remedial instruction? The questions that will arise are fascinating and challenging and they must be asked if the worthwhile elements of contemporary provision are going to be saved and something better created out of the wreckage.

Second without a viable LEA sector, do secular youth and community degree programmes have a long-term future? If so what should constitute their intellectual core? If not what alternative educational programmes might be developed to aid the development of new forms of practice?

Third what, if any, national bodies do we need to protect or create? The NYA was founded to service a vibrant local authority sector, UK Youth to co-ordinate the work of autonomous local associations that supported the work of hundreds of local clubs, NCVYS to help national voluntary youth organisations protect themselves against centralising attempts to encroach upon their territory and reduce their capacity for independent action. Whereas once these and others unmentioned were the servants of an aggressively independent membership, mostly they now more and more seek merely to make themselves indispensable to authority and have become the handmaidens of whoever will drop a coin in their begging-bowl. One feels obliged to ask, can they be reformed and, if so, is it worth the effort? Or must the work begin to design new bodies capable of contributing to the development of new forms of democratic and needs-led practice?

The aim of this essay was not to answer questions such as these, but to urge that they and many others like them be asked at a time when the old order is obviously passing<sup>3</sup>. The case for youth work and informal educational provision that focuses attention on young people is worth arguing for. In a 'greying world' in which the old feel less and less sympathy for the young; in the midst of a society in which corporate power threatens the viability of democracy as much as the overarching influence of the state does in China; and in an era when civil society, which has historically been the locale for youth work and informal education, is being squeezed as never before in peace-time, the need for youth work surely remains. The problem is that for some time youth work, especially the statutory sector, has been in a parlous state. The stench of decay has long been palpable. Therefore the urgent need is to focus on what we wish to see replace what will soon be gone.

## Reference

Nussbaum, M. C. (2010) *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, New Haven: Princeton University Press.

## Footnotes

- 1 For those who might wish to see this for themselves it can be accessed via [www.parliament.uk/education-committee](http://www.parliament.uk/education-committee)
- 2 Crichel Down is short-hand for the principle of ministerial responsibility. In 1954 Sir Thomas Dugdale resigned from office because, probably without his knowledge, land at Crichel Down requisitioned in 1938 from its owners for use by the RAF was sold instead of being returned to them. The minister resigned on a matter of principle, arguing that he must take ultimate responsibility for any illegal or unwarranted acts carried out by his civil servants. The Crichel Down principle has for many years been ignored by ministers.
- 3 An article that considers the question of what shape a post-statutory youth work sector might look like written by Mark Smith and the author of this essay is intended for a future issue of *Youth and Policy*.

# Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility: Youth Work offers the way forward

Viv Mckee

## Abstract

*The article argues that youth work should reposition within the current political climate. It recommends how those committed to shared youth work principles might organise in partnership with young people to articulate and advance the benefits of good youth work practice.*

**Key words:** Youth work, young people, policy, evidence, campaign.

**Y**OUTH WORK is enduring a firestorm with the onset of public sector cuts and is not well-placed to resist. The record of New Labour towards youth work was patchy: *Transforming Youth Work*, *Resourcing Excellent Youth Services*, *The Youth Opportunity Fund*, a ten year strategy for children and young people, as expressed in *Aiming High* – all widened and deepened the opportunities available to young people. However, these initiatives were, as Davies (2008) comments, undermined by frequent structural changes such as the creation of Connexions and Children's Services that left few advocates for youth work practice in senior positions within the local authority sector. Youth work has not generally been understood and valued at a policy level, both locally and nationally. Key research studies that have highlighted the value of youth work, such as Merton et al (2004), have been given little attention whilst much has been made of critical ambiguous research, such as Feinstein et al (2005). Indeed, too frequently the negative aspects revealed by the critical research have been quoted, often out of context, by Ministers and others who in doing so have sown doubts as to the value of the youth work approach. Youth workers as a consequence have often felt misunderstood and unsupported by their managers (Spence et al, 2006). We now need to learn from the past decade and find ways whereby youth work can make a better case for its distinctive approach and benefits.

Finding an effective way forward requires a timely, evidence-based and politically sensitive campaign to secure improvements for and with young people. Youth work requires such a campaign if young people are to continue to access the benefits it offers. There can be no suggestion that youth work is a panacea for all social ills, including the rising tide of youth unemployment, but it can play a part for, as Lauritzen (2008: 236) rightly notes, it can 'provide opportunities for young people to shape their own futures'. This, it can be argued, is sufficient of itself as a 'public good', but if it is to secure financial investment, a sustained case must be made in more detail and with more rigour concerning the value of youth work.

## Why make a social policy case for youth work?

Youth work offers a structured and time sensitive process which enables young people to shape their individual and collective lives. Young people value this experience but they have a limited voice in policy decisions. It is higher level policy decisions about purposes, structures and resources that determine whether or not youth work is available in particular localities, not the enthusiasm of young people for its presence. The outcomes of the youth work process occur over time and can only be evidenced with difficulty. Youth work advocates are often more inclined to focus on the day-to-day practice rather than the politics of how policy decisions are made about the work and therefore they are less likely to be at the decision-making table. In addition, there are examples of politicians at these tables trotting out apocryphal and unhelpful stories based on partial experience. These factors suggest that a determined national effort is required to secure investment. For without such investment, it is not only the young people who would be voluntary participants in youth work.

Sen (1999: 278) poses the question of ‘how can it be possible to arrive at cogent aggregative judgements about society?’ Coming from an economic standpoint, he spells out the need to allocate scarce resources effectively for the public good. This article proposes that three elements are needed in order to strengthen the position of youth work at the financial table:

- Conceptual clarity;
- a strong evidence base; and
- a pragmatic strategy.

### Conceptual clarity

Sen (1999) requires that we examine constructs, whilst recognising the risks of undertaking this journey. Clarity brings risks as well as advantages, yet without clarity there can be no common understanding and more importantly no common action. Davies recognised that the construct of youth work ‘needs to be understood in the wider context of the political, economic and social conditions in which it developed’ (cf. Verschelden et al, 2009: 138). Community Education, struggling for both definition and public acceptance, failed in this respect. ‘Well being’, similarly veered between being a government strategy and a generic concept and as a consequence did not embed itself in public discourse (Ereaut et al, 2008). During the previous administration many significant researchers, writers and academics made their contribution to the conceptualisation of youth work practice (eg. Jeffs, Smith, Doyle, Roberts, Batsleer, Davies. Ord, Merton, Spence et al, from the 1980s onwards). The worlds of youth work and young people themselves have benefited significantly from their analysis and exposition. Policy makers and service managers have not paid the same attention and, as a consequence, this thinking has had insufficient impact on the lived

reality of resourcing and delivery. The language of policy itself has now shifted and any previous gains are at risk. Tight definitions risk the overlay of political overtones, for example; as Davies (2009) notes, youth work should be viewed as a starting point rather than as a process – but lack of definition can result in total loss. Youth work moved in and out of that danger zone in the life-time of the previous government and continues to do so. For example, positive activities are said to help young people:

- acquire, and practise, specific social, physical, emotional and intellectual skills;
- contribute to the community;
- belong to a socially recognised group;
- establish supportive social networks of peers and adults;
- experience and deal with challenges;
- enjoy themselves (Audit Commission, 2010).

Youth work gets no explicit reference here; yet what is youth work if it does not deliver these outcomes for young people? It is through youth work that contact is made, a constructive relationship developed and young people supported to build their own capability. It is indefensible that the sector allows government to misappropriate the ‘goods’ of youth work in this fashion while denying the name of the practice. Even worse there are now those at senior levels in the sector who have been willing to collude with government defining ‘sport leaders’ and the like as ‘youth workers’. It is youth work, and youth work alone, threaded through a range of interesting activities and places which reaps the benefit for young people. Without the skilled intervention of a trusted adult, a positive activity is merely a means of passing the time. Those of us involved in seeking to influence policy during the time of the previous administration needed to describe youth work in a contemporary language, for example by using terms offered by HM Treasury (DfES and HMT, 2007). Now within the context of the governing Coalition, the sector needs to demonstrate the functionality of youth work, not just express a commitment to its values. We need to speak to the context and not allow something so important to remain at risk to civil service interpretation and political posturing.

## The evidence base for youth work

The case offered within the recent publication *The Benefits of Youth Work* (Mckee et al, 2010) was framed within *Every Child Matters* references. The publication mapped a range of evidence sources located within the policy priorities of the government of the time and which were widely accepted in the sector. It deliberately sought to create a meaningful link between the processes and outcomes of youth work and the funded priorities of government. It is, however, a transferable story and will, with necessary adaptation of language, relate well to the policy priorities of the Coalition. However a change in administration does mean the case needs to be remade to fit current thinking and language if it is to be heard by those holding the purse strings.



Lauritzen (2006) encapsulated the voluntary relationship between skilled, trusted adult and young person; the potential of constructive conversation and the principled commitment to ensuring young people remain in the ‘driving seat’ of their own lives. This is a gift to the philosophy of ‘the Big Society’, nebulous and contested as it currently is.

*Youth work helps young people learn about themselves, others and society, through non-formal educational activities which combine enjoyment, challenge and learning.*

(Mckee et al, 2010: 8).

Alinsky (1964), fashionable once more as the philosopher of community organising, once chided much community work as only providing ‘bats and balls’ and not dealing with profound social need. If we are to offer our young people more than ‘bats and balls’, we need to ensure that the ways of working with them include youth work, with its unique combination of goals, values and purposes. These are:

- The intended outcomes relate to the personal and social development of young people.
- The learning process is experiential and often based on group work.
- There is a voluntary engagement by young people in the process. (Mckee et al, 2010: 8).

Youth work is essentially a partnership with young people. They benefit from the process and also determine how the service should be delivered. The voice of young people is now underpinned by statute and guidance, though weakly expressed and implemented. Young people should be supported to understand this potential in the context of the current struggle.

Common components underpin good youth work whatever the setting. The Comprehensive Spending Review (2007) identified seven factors which need to be in place to improve outcomes for young people. These were:

- Providing opportunities for young people to gain skills that build their well being.
- Developing young people’s personal effectiveness through building their ability to arrive at their own choices and solutions to problems.
- Making links between the different aspects of young people’s lives.
- Setting and demonstrating appropriate standards of behaviour.
- Keeping young people safe from physical and mental harm.
- Putting proper supervision in place, through which adults provide clear, appropriate and consistent rules and expectations.
- Sustaining young people’s involvement over time. (DfES and HMT, 2007).

This is youth work by another name. These words should be claimed on behalf of and with young

people. Sadly, there have been attempts to impose the vacuous term ‘positive activities’; allowing youth work’s approach to be caught between the views of government seeking more organised programmes and achievable outcomes and those who prefer to emphasise the process. Yet, youth work aims to secure outcomes for the young and does not exist for the benefit of the worker; youth work is process with a purpose and goals even if they are less programmatic and mechanistic than the government may seek.

The *Benefits of Youth Work* summarised from research how youth work supported young people to achieve *Every Child Matters* outcomes. It offered a coherent evidence base on which local and national advocates can build.

In relation to health it noted: ‘Youth workers are skilled professionals who can help young people use information and judgement to make informed decisions for themselves’ (Mckee et al, 2010: 14). In relation to safety:

*Youth work helps young people consider and make different choices about risky behaviour. Currently there is a nationwide concern about the involvement of young people in violent and gang related crime. Youth work is recognised as a process through which young people can be supported to take a different path.* (Mckee et al, 2010: 17).

Strong arguments were made in relation to learning; ones worth revisiting with regards to the context of the 14 – 19 debate. Youth work offers a chance for all young people to extend their skills, to test new ways forward and to consolidate their learning. For some young people, however, youth work is their first and only chance to learn. They have struggled in the mainstream and will not easily find their way back into the formal system. Youth work offers them opportunities for self-development, with the attendant impact on communities at large. With the burgeoning problems of unemployment and the determination to secure a localised solution to community matters, the government, as well as the country, has much to gain from proper investment in youth work services. Skilled young people, with a commitment to community and a positive sense of self-worth are an asset to a struggling economy. Youth work sits at the heart of voluntary action. The expected partnership with young people means that workers are skilled in securing for young people a voice in shaping the collective endeavour.

*[Youth work] supports them to engage in democratic decision making processes, from local youth forums and youth cabinets to national influence through the British Youth Council and UK Youth Parliament. It works with young people in the community context to broker their involvement in local debates.* (Mckee et al, 2010: 21)

Taking on board some of the language of the day, youth work can be advanced as a structured

intervention into the lives of young people; offering a coherent ethical framework in which young people have the freedom to explore and test out new ways of being and doing. The opportunity is particularly important for those young people who struggle in the mainstream. Youth work contributes to social fairness by redistributing opportunity to those in need by helping young people take responsibility for their decisions and their futures.

## The case for pragmatism

Kotter suggests that the way forward is to:

*Create a sense of urgency, recruit powerful change leaders, build a vision and effectively communicate it, remove obstacles, create quick wins, and build on your momentum... That's when you can declare a true victory, then sit back and enjoy the change that you envisioned so long ago.* (Kotter, u.d. web reference).

The urgency is now: this is the opportunity to seize a moment in the sun or, viewed more pessimistically, to shield the work from an impending and actual funding disaster. The government is struggling with targets for NEET, citizenship, and social disadvantage (IPPR, 2010). The political context also offers the environment for change. Unless action is taken, youth work will be lost within competing policy priorities. Success will be contingent on the context, and action is required by all concerned.

### *The voice of young people*

There is a need to advance and secure the position of youth work within the education repertoire.

*One of the reasons this issue has remained so intractable for so long is that it has been approached in a disconnected way, without seeing the landscape as the young see it.* (Mckee, ud. web reference).

Young people are part of the cohort of change agents. Young people spoke up for youth work during the Comprehensive Spending Review (Mckee et al, 2010). They said that without the support of youth workers 'places to go and things to do' becomes meaningless as they have neither the confidence nor information to access such opportunities (DfES and HMT, 2007). In the Youth Summit later in 2007 young people spoke alongside ministers, officials and strategic service leads and helped shape the agenda for the new prime minister (CYP Now, 2007). Without the voice of young people a campaign for youth work is meaningless. Fortunately in addition to well known young people-led organisations such as Youth Bank UK, young people across the country have had a major experience of decision-making. Davies notes that:

*Particularly significant here was the creation of Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds, with grants from the funds to local youth projects and activities being decided by local youth panels with considerable autonomy. (Davies cf. Verschelden et al, 2009: 72).*

These projects were developed in partnership with young people and have generated a cohort who can speak for the value of the experience. Youth workers must secure space for this voice to be heard. Members of Centrepoint Youth Parliament have been invited in to make their views known to government about Education Maintenance Allowances; government should understand that without youth work support, this would never have been possible for these young people.

### *The contribution of staff and volunteers*

Youth workers are also in their own right key change leaders. They shape the practice and must take steps to record and communicate its value. Their potential reach can be significant. Their work with young people can unlock the voice of direct beneficiaries, their friends, families and communities. They can also bring to the table the voice of allied professions, researchers and managers.

*Some parallel professions, for example youth justice workers, use a youth work approach to make contact and build a negotiated and respectful relationship. In other cases, youth workers work alongside other professionals, for example in schools or in the secure estate. (Mckee et al, 2010: 29).*

### *Many voices but one melody*

The modern ‘jazz’ of youth work must be transposed into some common themes which can be accessed by those outside the youth work circle. Loncle states that the ‘Lack of unity amongst youth workers represents a real weakness’ (cf. Verschelden et al, 2009: 131). The ‘process of open, collaborative innovation is impossible unless the people involved share common goals and frames of reference’ (Leadbeater, 2008: 14).

This is a challenge for youth workers who straddle the positions originally exemplified by Butters; with most noise created by the more extreme radical or reactionary positions and not by those who lie within what he defined as the ‘Social Education Repertoire’ (Butters et al, 1978). This is not the time for the sector to fall apart along these internal lines, with the voluntary sector claiming that it goes further and faster than the agents of the state; and the local authority sector claiming an exceptional professionalism. This is the time to demonstrate youth work’s value and its successful outcomes; speaking in the language of decision-makers and holding on to the partnership which enables local diversity and choice (NYA, 2006). Youth workers share a deep commitment to young

people and to their practice; it is possible to uncover common elements across the repertoire and to advance these, particularly in the face of so much opposition from a resource-starved public sector.

Agreement is difficult when passions are high and finance tight. A moment's reflection, however, generally highlights the common ground, the intended benefits for young people. It is this ground which offers the foundation for shared planning, and harnessing the individual and specific contributions (Hamden Turner, 1990).

### *Provide current evidence*

A body of evidence is required if claims are to be made about investment. According to Sen (1999: 184); 'Our deeply felt real world concerns have to be substantially integrated with the analytical use of formal and mathematical reasoning'. This requires attention to valid data over time, in addition to qualitative accounts. When resources are scarce an approach which only speaks to hearts but not to minds will simply not work.

Admittedly data capture is often difficult in this field, alien to practitioners and seen as a diversion, but, in reality in public policy it is 'the reach and reasonableness' of evidence (Sen 1999: 185). It is sufficient to be systematic and thoughtful. Recording of the lived reality of young people's lives backed by a simple numerical collection is possible even in the small working unit. It takes minimal time if well organised. Small voluntary organisations involved in the Neighbourhood Support Fund were very competent at telling their story and as a consequence they increased the longevity of the funding scheme and helped The Treasury understand the time requirements of the youth work process (see for example, [www.nationalliteracytrust.net](http://www.nationalliteracytrust.net)). Young people themselves deserve to understand the outcomes from the process which they enter of their free will. Similarly, parents and communities have the right to be assured that this is a better or as good an investment of resources than, for example, support for the frail elderly. The evidenced expertise of a youth worker or youth policy advocate is a baseline for success. Practice, therefore, must be accompanied by a data development strategy, locally and nationally ([www.resultsbasedaccountability.com](http://www.resultsbasedaccountability.com)). Becker et al (2004) highlights the gaps between practice, analysed evidence and influence on policy.

Whilst there is a significant body of academic writing, there is a real question as to whether this is in the language and format that policy makers wish to access. Brokerage is required so that this rich seam of knowledge is accessed and used by officials and politicians whose priorities may lie elsewhere.

Evidence, then, is essential but not sufficient. A common language should be developed to support translation; one embraced by advocates but resonating equally with decision-makers in the policy

environment. A version of *The Benefits of Youth Work* inserted into the current policy context and supported by key stakeholders would provide the starting point. This is not the time to debate the number of angels on a pinhead but to advance some simple and agreed truths. The Select Committee enquiry is happening now. Adults prefer to lock their new experience into their existing mental frameworks. Youth work must make those links; especially to offset the tendency of policy makers to apply their brief, often superficially, to the wider context. ‘Invariably systems changes stretch far beyond the boundaries of any single organisation’ (Murray et al, 2010: 7); It is necessary to open the system and share the challenges and benefits with all, not only those in the inner circle of privilege. Pittman calls for a paradigm shift. He uses the language of ‘beyond’; ‘beyond youth professionals’, ‘beyond schools and the school building’ He advocates the creation of a public idea, a shared understanding of what is needed to secure a proper present and future for young people (Pittman et al 2000: 24, 25). Those who are concerned to secure the future of youth work should consider whether they have the appetite for ‘adapting the script’.

### *Trusted Advocates*

The process of developing *Aiming High for Young People* demonstrated this need for an adaptable youth work script. The concept of ‘Trusting Young People’ provides an excellent example of changing the script and building an alliance through coalition. Many organisations came together with a powerful voice on behalf of and with young people. They translated their words into action. Compromise was a key to picking a way forward for, although not all agreed with the process and goals, there was sufficient momentum to create change. Securing improved legislation and statutory guidance (DfES, 2007: para 38) determined the policy and influencing work of The NYA from the early days of creating *Transforming Youth Work* and thereafter (NYA, 2004). Wedded to its values the organisation organised its activity and shaped its self presentation; including in behind the scenes meetings with ministers and officials which could not be disclosed without damaging access, to secure a youth work place at the resource table in the rapidly changing policy environment. During the Labour administration The NYA worked hard to influence the long trail of government’s stuttering attempts to reinvigorate youth services (Wylie, 2008). The more perilous time of 2011 requires this same level of skill, determination and endeavour and national leadership.

### *Quick Wins*

With a strategic alliance, evidence and a means of communication, the next step is to create the ‘quick win’. Any worker or manager worth their salt has up their sleeve a ‘shopping list’ of ideas for the sudden discovery of underspends in January, the next Foundation resource announcement or the latest Government initiative. This is the ‘Trojan Mouse’ upon which the mainstream can be built (Nussbaum, 2000) and the creation of Youth Opportunity and Capital Funds offer brilliant national examples of the success of this approach. Local examples are too numerous to catalogue.

The challenge is to move from innovation to mainstream; from prototype to production; and to create an industrial scale response out of a successful initiative.

Persistence is essential. The focus must be on the long run (Nussbaum, 2000). DEFRA (2005) struggles with the short and long term challenge of the UK contribution to the world environment. Short term wins within a long term goal is the approach. Youth work will survive through similar tactics. There will be moments of advance as well as forced retreat. Powerful stories will keep it alive. The provision of youth work in the mainstream, however, requires a concerted strategy rather than a soap box campaign.

## Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility

This paper has been predicated on a belief that a key task of all governments is to allocate scarce resources (Sen, 1999). Youth work therefore has to advocate 'need' and demonstrate better value for investment. It must speak in the language of the current government programme which at least initially was presented as having three main components – freedom, fairness and responsibility. Here is the basis of the youth work case.

Youth work offers young people *freedom*. Partnership with young people will bring them into the decision frame. Although it is an unenviable task, making difficult decisions is part of democracy. Replogle (1989) claims that when we accede with a rule for our known and agreed good, that this represents liberty rather than oppression; and young people are capable of good decisions, compromises and hard choices. Good youth work supports young people in this endeavour.

Youth work offers young people positive liberty, the power and capabilities to fulfil their potential within a democratic framework. The 'means such as income and other resources, while valuable in the pursuit of capabilities, are not themselves indicators of the capabilities and freedoms that people actually have' (Sen, 2010, web reference). Youth work builds capability in young people and leads therefore to a deeper and sustained freedom.

The Coalition remains committed to ending child poverty in the UK by 2020. Poverty is determined by more than income. Poverty can be defined by 'personal heterogeneities; environmental diversities; variations in social climate; difference in relative deprivation' (Sen, 1999: 194). Youth work builds capabilities in young people in their given circumstances. Youth work promotes *fairness* across society overall through recognition of 'the real advantages and disadvantages of different persons, related to their substantive well-being, freedoms, or opportunities' (Sen, 1999: 201). It works on, 'individual advantage in terms of respective capabilities, which the person has to live the way he or she has reason to value' (Sen, 1999:192). Further youth work understands that in society 'asymmetric norms are quietly dominant' (Sen, 1999: 197), and shapes its interventions to

the particular needs of young women, young people from Black and minority ethnic communities, young disabled people and those from other disadvantaged groups. The tradition of equity, of *fairness*, is at the heart of youth work.

The promotion of *responsibility* is intrinsic to the youth work process. Through building skills and confidence youth work builds capability in young people. Rights without functionality are mere window dressing.

*Youth workers help young people learn to make an effective contribution to their communities.*

Various research studies have noted the importance of youth workers being seen as offering credible role models who understand the realities of young people's lives, as well as how they can be helped to expand their aspirations. *Good Youth Work* notes that the credibility of youth workers in young people's eyes very often derives from being close to the community (Merton, 2007). This also emerged as a strong dimension of the Positive Futures programme (Mckee et al, 2010). The Cattle report on Community Cohesion noted the value of youth workers of similar ethnic or faith backgrounds to the young people working with them to build trust and broker conversations between groups within and without school settings.

### *Youth workers build conversations between generations*

Youth work is particularly important in building relationships between generations, in drawing on what people of all ages hold in common, as well as recognising differences in their experiences. Young people have much to gain from inter-generational programmes. Relationships with 'safe' adults can offer a space to explore adulthood; to try out new ways of being themselves in different guises without being exposed to the ridicule of their friends; and to develop new skills and the confidence to belong to a wider community. This is particularly important as the pressures on adolescence increase. There are many examples of successful programmes addressing issues such as digital inclusion, befriending, heritage, dance, and identity.

### *Youth work builds skills towards employability and employment*

In stringent times the labour market and employability rise up the policy agenda.

*Narrowing the gap in learning experiences and opportunities outside formal education depends on effective strategies for reaching out to and engaging those young people who do not normally participate in such activities. While formal referral systems may be appropriate in some cases, to achieve the goal of broadening participation to the "non usual suspects",*



*the government must also protect the distinctive value of more detached, flexible and informal ways of working.* (Bamfield, 2007: 50).

Youth work is the means by which young people can be supported to take responsibility for themselves, their communities and the future of the economy.

## Conclusion

This article has offered an essentially pragmatic approach to making the case for youth work. There is no apology for this. It works. There are risks in dealing in this way; it can be easier just to grandstand and present a principled but idealistic case, but there is however no visible alternative. Whether youth work survives the current policy upheaval and national financial crisis depends on the ability of its advocates to co-operate and to offer an evidenced case in the language of decision-makers. Action is needed now, before we are faced with total ruin of all that has been created. Young people must be at the heart of the case.

The Ask should be:

- That policy makers use the term ‘youth work’ and not some synonym to describe the range of beneficial opportunities, interventions and outcomes.
- Continued investment in a proper range of youth work opportunities and experiences for young people outside of formal education.
- Work in partnership with young people themselves to determine, deliver, benefit from and quality assure this offer, building on the strengths of the Youth Opportunity Funds, programmes and services and the range of participation systems currently in place across the UK.
- The establishment and maintenance of a framework for a local youth work offer to sit alongside independent information, advice and guidance, and easy access to facilities and activities as part of an offer to the young.
- The extension and maintenance of strong bridges between the formal and non formal systems so young people can harvest their learning for themselves and for wider society.
- Investment in the youth work workforce – so that young people are supported and developed effectively and appropriately.

‘If we achieve the above we will secure and sustain the practice of direct work with young people’ (Mckee et al, 2010). We will judge our success through:

- The existence of a ‘different frame of mind about what constitutes the terrain of education’ (Roberts, 2010: 77).

- A longitudinal study of young people and the benefits of youth work removes all doubt for all time.
- Confident engagement by the UK in a European wide youth work policy.
- Youth work being an essential component of a formalised offer to the young.
- Young people telling us that we have improved their lives.

Our society has aspirations for young people. We must hold onto these through difficult times. We must act with young people to turn hopes into reality. Young people will bear the burden of the future we have created. We need to ensure that they are strong, confident and equipped to shape a better world for all. We must act now to retain, develop and recreate good services for the young, with youth work at their heart.

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# Youth work stories: in search of qualitative evidence on process and impact

## In Defence of Youth Work campaign

Bernard Davies

### Abstract

*The article presents emerging qualitative evidence on youth work's process and impact in the form of five very personal and honest 'stories' of practice. These stories demonstrate a practice based on principles of open access informal education and a concern for democratic voice. It explores the complex process of dialogue and shared activity between the young people and youth worker. This is set against a climate of youth work which has been adopted to work with specific target groups, those who are defined as NEET, young offenders, 'undesirables' with the aim of behaviour modification. Such a practice of diversionary tick box exercises has dominated youth work in recent years.*

*The discussion contextualises the five stories politically and in relation to current youth policies, a time of restructuring, cuts and youth service closures. In conclusion the article identifies some of the key defining features within the practice around communication, time and space explored and described through the lives of the young people and youth workers with whom they chose to engage.*

**Key words:** Youth work; youth work practice

### Context

**T**HE IN DEFENCE OF Youth Work (IDYW) campaign seeks to re-affirm youth work as an emancipatory practice which is 'on young people's side' as they strive to clarify who they are and who they want to be. It starts where young people who choose to be involved are starting, engages with them on their terms through a negotiated programme, and works towards outcomes they help to shape. Its informal education approaches, underpinned by often painstakingly developed trusting relationships, seek to open up new opportunities both for personal learning and for expressing a democratic voice, through which young people can become more aware of themselves and the world around them, becoming more confident in responding to it. In asserting this view of youth work, IDYW has sought explicitly to challenge policy-makers who have boxed

youth work into simply providing diversionary (albeit ‘positive’) activities designed to keep young people off the streets and out of adults’ way (see IDYW, 2010).

To counter the simplistic number crunching and ‘tick boxing’ which has dominated youth work in recent years, the IDYW ‘Stories project’ has gathered youth workers’ own qualitative evidence of this emancipatory practice in action. At the heart of this article are accounts by youth workers particularly seeking to convey to policy makers and other professionals what constitutes quality youth work and why public policy should continue to support it.

The need to spread this understanding and support has never been more urgent. The current Government’s only commitment to ‘youth’ appears to be its National Citizen Service which, unlike most existing youth work provision, is aimed only at 16-19 year olds and, with a very limited brief, will operate only in school holidays (see de St Croix, 2011). Meanwhile, young people and youth work facilities are paying the price of an economic crisis which was, in the words of a recent US government report, the result of ‘a big miss, not a stumble’ – by the ‘human action and inaction’ – of powerful financial interests (Rushe, 2011).

As a direct result, where youth services are not being closed down, they are either being restructured as youth social work services or cut massively – or both: budgets are down in 2011-12 by an estimated £100m, jobs by 3,000 (BBC, 2011). Voluntary youth organisations, many heavily dependent on state funding, are also reducing their workforce – even closing. With the real impact of all this not yet fully realised, where youth work will be delivered in the future or in what form is far from clear.

The closure of services to young people has been fiercely opposed by trade unions, campaigns such as *Choose Youth* and *In Defence of Youth Work* and, most strikingly, by groups of young people themselves – all confirming that youth work matters to many of them. Not that this is the first time it has had to justify its existence. Under New Labour, with a predominant focus on government targets, youth workers increasingly found themselves concentrating on pre-labelled groups (Davies and Merton, 2009, 2010) and being used as agents of behavioural modification.

This work often came with (relatively) generous funding – from the police, housing associations, the Youth Justice Board, even anti-terrorist budgets. However, as funders demanded quite specific ‘outcomes’, scope was narrowed for responding to young people’s concerns as they might define them. Work in schools was directed at retaining ‘failing’ pupils in education. ‘Positive activities’, ‘youth inclusion’ and ‘community safety’ programmes were focused on diverting young people from ‘anti social behaviour’; ‘preventing violent extremism’ programmes on keeping Muslim young people safe from Islamic fundamentalism.

Increasingly, these priorities removed resources from open access provision – historically the bedrock of youth work (Clubs for Young People, 2009: 12, 55). Greater emphasis was placed on profiling young people in advance of a youth worker’s contact with them and on sharing their personal information (St Croix, 2008; 2010) – trends which were exacerbated by New Labour’s integration of youth workers into multi-disciplinary teams also often focused on ‘working on’ rather than ‘with’ ‘challenging’ individuals. As some youth workers took on case loads and participated in formalised assessment procedures, their core role – engaging and developing relationships with groups of young people – was devalued (Davies and Merton, 2009, 2010).

Through all this youth work’s distinctive features were often lost in the translation, with the practice being misinterpreted and then redefined by agencies which, with little if any background in youth work, were helped to hit their own targets. In buying into what they saw as the youth work approach, they often failed to recognise the complex process of dialogue and shared activity and learning between young person and worker needed to achieve the outcomes they wanted (see Davies, 2005; Spence and Devanney, 2006).

While resisting this contraction of youth work’s definition, IDYW has recognised that the benefits of this practice are not always immediately apparent. Though when viewed from the outside little may appear to be going on, meaningful conversations may slowly be shaping ideas for a project, resulting in new practical and life skills being learnt. Disclosures of personal information may be leading to offers of advice and other forms of support. A heightened awareness of social issues may be generating responses to spiritual needs or versions of political education very different from ‘religious education’ or ‘citizenship’. And all while fun is being had!

Youth workers have sometimes been slow in getting these messages out to a wider audience. More recently some of them, as well as many managers, have been too ready to take on the jargon of funding bodies, suggesting that youth work can meet unrealisable expectations – reduce teenage pregnancies by X%, cut a geographical area’s first time entries into the youth justice system by Y%, get Z% of ‘NEETs’ back into education. Youth work might be making its contributions, though with direct cause and effect rarely quantified or even explicitly identified.

While guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality, the IDYW ‘Stories’ project has sought to provide ‘coal-face’ workers with an alternative way of publicly accounting for their practice. Still very much a work in progress, the intention has been to gather qualitative evidence from different parts of the country – varied in setting, in the young people’s backgrounds, practice aims and outcomes. The resultant narratives seek to convey to that wider audience something of both the distinctiveness and the complexities of youth work and how it can contribute to outcomes sought by policy-makers – and valued by the young people.

## Five youth work stories:

### **Holding onto your dignity: Supporting Black young people against ‘the system’**

Black young people from a large housing estate complained to the local youth workers that they were constantly being stopped and searched by police, particularly if they hung around near a local shop where some of them might be searched several times in an evening. The estate is predominantly white though with a significant Black community – perhaps 15-20%. White young people said it also happened to them when they were out with Black friends. The young people also said that the police often refused to give them the stop and search sheet when they asked for it.

One fourteen year old for example said he’d been accused of being a drug dealer when officers found he had two phones on him. He’d tried to explain that one was his new phone but had no calling credit, so he was still carrying his old phone because it still had credit and not everybody had his new number. Officers wouldn’t listen – they seemed determined to find further evidence that he was selling drugs.

Another twelve year old told the youth workers that he’d been stopped and searched on the street by officers who told him they’d received complaints of a BB gun being used in the area by a ‘boy who fits your description’. He took this to mean that they were Black.

Youth workers themselves saw this happening first hand.

The police inspector for the area had made contact with the youth workers when he had come into post a year or so before. There had been some discussion between police and youth workers about how police could improve their poor relationships with young people in the area. However, youth workers had been unable to find a way to bring the police in without endangering the sense of ownership of the youth club and its space which the new area youth worker was fostering for young people.

After talking to the young people about the police action the youth workers agreed to invite the neighbourhood police team into the youth club so that the young people could talk to them about the stop and search activity on their own terms. When the youth work team made this decision, they invited the sergeant in to discuss how they could work together. He brought one of his colleagues, a very young beat officer. The area youth worker made it absolutely clear that this would be an invitation which applied to that day and time only and would not stand as an open invitation for officers

to arrive unannounced in the future. She clarified what youth workers hoped to get from the session and another youth worker outlined some of the anecdotal evidence young people had described and why the need for some reparative work had arisen.

The youth project was opened for this session outside of normal opening hours to make sure that the young people who came knew clearly that this was what they were attending. There were snacks available and young people were able to play pool and look at police handcuffs. There were about twenty young people at the session, including about five of the Black young men who'd experienced stop and search.

About eight of the neighbourhood police team came, including beat officers and local PCSOs. The police acknowledged a number of the young men by name as they entered the building. They knew the names because of the searches, not because these young people had criminal records or had any other reason to be 'known' to the police.

The police wanted to explain to the young people why they had to do stop and search. Youth workers reinforced messages about young people's rights and responsibilities through a question and answer session. One young man described how he had been humiliated by the police by being asked to remove his shoes and coat in public on repeated occasions. He said how much he hated the police as a result of this humiliation. The young people said that one of the officers at the meeting never gave them the stop and search sheets that he was supposed to. Some police were shocked that this was happening and shocked to hear how much the young people hated them as a result of the searches. The police were asked to think about how it would feel if they were treated in the way that they were treating these young people.

Officers were initially very defensive. The young man who stated that he hated the police had sat in silence, playing Playstation throughout the session and speaking to youth workers but making no eye contact with the police. He would not have spoken at all but one officer asked 'who here still hates the police after meeting us all today?' At this point he replied loudly 'I do'. He went on to describe how he is frequently stopped on a very busy public road and searched.

The youth workers knew that the young people had made an enormous leap of faith by trusting them and attending the meeting. They said that their parents either didn't believe them or couldn't do anything about the stop and search. One young man said his father had been at home when he had been stopped and searched outside his own house. He was worried that his father would be furious if he looked out and saw



what was happening. The young people said that the middle class professionals they knew seemed to have no idea about what they were feeling.

The project bought a bus pass for the young man who described being constantly stopped and searched on his walk home every day. He lived in a hostel on a long, busy road where there is a heavy police presence and it was usually here he was stopped. This helped as he did not have to walk the length of the road, thus coming to the attention of the police, but he is still being stopped by the police.

Although the searches continued just as before, the young people feel differently. They are still angry but they have heard the police acknowledge that they have rights. They know they are in the right even though the police continue to search them. They now have a sense of solidarity and an affirmation of their experiences. The youth workers have shown that they believe and understand the young people's feelings – for example, understanding why the young people run when they see the police even though they haven't done anything wrong.

### **Retrospect**

The young man with the bus pass recently came into the centre to see the youth workers. (He now lives out of the area). He discussed the session and described how, although it was painful at the time to be confronted in a safe forum by those he saw as enemies, it was a relief to vent some of his anger. He recalled how the youth workers had told him honestly that they could not change what was happening but that he could change his reaction. He was advised to stay calm, ask for a stop and search sheet after the event and to discuss his feelings around the searches with them as often as he needed to. The area youth worker buying him a bus pass had made him feel that he was being believed and listened to.

He stated that he's still regularly stopped and had, in fact, been stopped just a couple of nights ago and told that he fitted the description of a 12 year old runaway. As he is very tall and heavily built, easily passing for being in his twenties, he asked the officer what the description was and was told that the runaway was 'Black and wearing a hat'. He was able to laugh about this with the youth worker and said that he feels that he can now walk away from the searches with his dignity. The police no longer succeed in humiliating him in the way that they did.

### **Postscript**

A young Black male youth worker was taking this same group of young men to the cinema as part of an alternative programme of provision for excluded young people.

A few minutes away from the centre the group was stopped by 2 PCSOs. A riot van quickly arrived and an officer jumped out to ask where the group was going and what they were doing. When the youth worker explained his role and the purpose of their visit, the officer returned to his vehicle – without conducting a search.

### **‘On the boundary’:**

#### **Three years of detached work with a group of young women**

The youth work focused on six young women whose chaotic relationships with each other and with their families offered them little stability in their lives. Within the group arguments tended to be sorted out by threatening or aggressive reactions, particularly from two of the girls, with much of their behaviour being alcohol-related. In their neighbourhood their activities were causing ‘anarchy’, resulting in abuse to themselves and serious problems for the wider community.

The group was first engaged through detached youth work, though this was a struggle, especially on Bonfire night. However, by working with the young women as a group and taking them, on their own ‘turf’, for who they were, conversations started to develop. Through these, interests and strengths as well as needs began to emerge. One young woman for example was able to enter into a proper dialogue while all showed a concern to improve their community. They also turned up when they said they would and made their own arrangements for meeting the youth workers.

Through the detached work, opportunities opened up for the workers to demonstrate acceptance, offer support and follow through on promises made – such as finding a football team for one of the young women to join. The youth workers stayed consistent in when and where they met the group, eventually responding to the girls’ need for somewhere warm and safe to go by offering them the youth centre as a meeting place – something which they had requested.

As they weren’t required to join an existing group, the young women were able to go on attending the centre as a group. They increasingly then began to make more demands on the youth workers’ time – by for example negotiating sessions for themselves on sexual health, drugs and alcohol. Though they weren’t liked by other young people using the centre, working with them as an established friendship group gave them attention in their own right. Over time, the dynamics of the group changed – they became chatty, talked and also listened to each other and acted protectively to each other.

They also became jealous for staff time with the activities they agreed to do often seeming less important to the group than spending time with the youth workers. On occasions their professional relationship with the youth workers could spill over into the personal – for example when, on Boxing Day, one of the young women phoned one of the youth workers who, she felt, was the only person able to help her. This for the youth worker illustrated two things: how much youth work, for it to be effective, had to happen ‘on the boundaries’; and how, far from being ‘just a job’, it had to ‘go the extra mile’, remain ‘open door’, on-going, unfinished.

This piece of practice also demonstrated to the youth workers how much could be developed out of and through a small tight friendship group. However, the work never fitted easily into the local service’s approach, with other workers being critical of it for focusing only on a small group. Nor, as it only ever involved six young people, was it seen by managers as cost effective work within the youth centre. When the project manager closed it down ‘as of today’, the workers enrolled the young women onto a NEET programme and continued to work with them on the streets. With the young women’s achievements only counting once as ‘accreditation outcomes’, the workers also had to resist a range of other administrative and evaluation pressures. Over the three years, they also had to play a juggling game over funding, passing the group from one funding stream to another in order to justify the youth work that was being done.

As a piece of face-to-face practice, the work was never straightforward. One member of the group who was too young to join the NEET programme or to take part with the other girls in an exciting sailing event was put on an ASBO and, after the group stopped meeting, was given a custodial sentence. Throughout however she managed to keep a positive relationship with the youth centre.

Over three years the way the young women dealt with the pressures they faced began to change. They did litter picks and ran a gardening programme and planting project, taking on board that this kind of community engagement would challenge the negative way they were seen by their wider community, the community wardens and the police. They got involved in the council’s Youth Forum, consulting with other young people on how they saw the problems facing them, until eventually they became the face of the youth centre. They raised some large sums of money for the project and one of the group won a young achievers award for service to their community.

In the process, their view of themselves changed, too. No longer did they see themselves as ‘scum’. Individually, they started to feel comfortable being on their own

as their need lessened for the security of each other's company in order to achieve what they wanted. One of the girls decided to leave the area as the best way to succeed while two of them went on to become youth workers – a career route opened up for one of them after being appointed a 'young advocate'.

The youth workers also on occasions drew on the trust built into their relationships with the young women to challenge them, sometimes in quite personal ways. When for example one of the young women seemed to be setting herself up to fail by applying for an educational course for which she was not yet ready, one of the youth workers felt able, in a very up-front way, to advise her to postpone the application until she'd got more experience and qualifications, steering her instead towards an alternative opportunity.

### **Creative improvisation: A youth work response to 'knife crime'**

The relationships youth workers make in the youth centre often do not stay in the youth centre because, sharing the same shops, parks and streets with young people, these can all become meeting places. The work and project described here began when Helen, a youth worker on the Greenville estate, saw Adam when she was visiting a local park with her family. In fact, it wasn't really 'an encounter' as she saw him but he did not see her – or if he did he didn't let on.

Helen's youth work 'nose' told her that, from the way Adam was carrying himself, he was carrying a knife concealed under his jacket. The next time she saw him was at the youth centre. He came in, milled around talking to friends, played pool – at no point did he approach her, nor she him. However as, alone, he was leaving at the end of the evening she went over to him, asked how he was, exchanged news. She eventually asked him if anything was bothering him. She was concerned for him, she said, because she'd seen him earlier in the park. She didn't ask him to confirm or deny whether he had a knife – she just allowed him to take the time to consider that she'd seen him and draw the conclusion that she knew he had been carrying a knife. She didn't see it as a test – nor did she want a definite answer. She knew that, in such situations, if a conversation with a young person was to keep going, sometimes some ambiguity in the discussion had to be allowed to sustain a level of comfort and anonymity.

Adam knew that Helen knew that his brother was already in prison for a knife-related offence and she knew the devastating impact that this had on Adam and his family. A lot of 'knowing' was passing between them even though not many words had been exchanged over the years. Though Adam was conscious of and sensitive to this, he was also aware that black young men were being subjected to very high levels of stop-and-search – something that was true of Greenville which also included the park and the youth centre. As a black young man he therefore understood that, even though many more young white men hung around the estate, he was particularly vulnerable.

Having the youth centre 'on the doorstep' made a big difference to how the young people saw both it and Helen. When she first started to work at the centre there was a core group of young people of Caribbean origin. Whether because she was a youth worker, an authority person, white, female, maybe a mixture of all of these, they wouldn't acknowledge her, wouldn't even make eye contact. They would walk past her as if she wasn't there, was of no significance. This was their way of 'owning' the centre, of making clear who mattered. Over the years this had changed as relationships and trust grew. And, with the change, a mediation role developed in their relationships – with institutions such as schools and the police, with other young people and with their families.

By chance, that weekend Helen was visiting Jack, a young man from Greenville who she'd kept contact with after he'd been sent to prison. Jack had energy, charisma and a sharp intelligence which didn't take too many prisoners – but which had made a prisoner of him. Though the 'street' had quickly recognised this intelligence, his experience of schooling was one of struggle on which all sides had given up fairly quickly. On the visit, without naming names, Helen discussed with Jack her encounters with Adam, which led him to suggest that he write an open letter to the young people at the youth centre, telling them what it was like in a prison. Jack's letter duly arrived a couple of weeks later.

Helen told the young people about the letter, suggesting they think about and respond to what Jack had written about life in prison – about not seeing your family; wondering how they were but not being able to help or support them; watching people who you had thought of as friends slip away, leaving only a few who genuinely cared. He explained, too, how it meant having every letter read by a stranger before it reached you; using the toilet as the other prisoner who shared your cell ate his meal – or vice versa; being naked in front of prison guards. The letter described the repetitiveness of each day, having to keep a front with everyone around you preserving their boundaries

and themselves, all the time signalling where nobody could tread. In all this, Category C prisons were the most dangerous because, whatever the other prisoners' offence, it was big.

Some young people were sympathetic to Jack's account; for others it was just a matter of – 'if you do the crime then you do the time'. However, both sets of reactions generated questions they wanted to put to Jack, demonstrating that this was a topic that meant something to them and which touched strong positions, emotions and memories. One young woman, Martha, who had kept a hostile distance from Helen for as long as Helen could remember, was particularly affected and left the discussion suddenly to go to the toilets. When Helen followed her it was clear that her hostility to her hadn't subsided – expressed in the question: "What would you know as a white woman?" This time however a shift occurred as Helen's relationship with Jack and her conversations with the others had challenged Martha's stereotyped view of her.

Eventually Martha talked of the impact on her of seeing her brother beaten up by the police when she was a child. That violence had left emotional scars – and the violence of knife crime had brought those feelings back. In her eyes it was all violence, all of it the same, the uniform not justifying any of it. When Helen was challenged by Martha on how she was affected by this issue, Helen explained that she believes everyone in society is affected by the issue, whether or not they live 'on the front line'.

Shortly afterwards, all these conversations took on an even greater emotive charge – and the work a heightened urgency – when a young man was murdered with a knife by another young man. Both had strong links to Greenville. As a way of giving the young people affected somewhere to be, the youth workers opened the youth centre on Sundays – so they could explore what they were feeling and respond to what had happened.

The latest murder added a new poignancy to the questions the young people wanted to ask Jack – about his family, his feelings about the people he'd hurt, what he would have done differently and, most astutely, what would have needed to be there for him to have acted differently. For confidentiality reasons it wasn't possible to put the questions to him personally. So Helen wrote to a number of local prisons and youth offending services asking if the young people could put the questions to some of their prisoners. One Deputy Governor expressed interest in the project, partly because, he confided later, his wife had grown up in Greenville.

It became clear that discussing the issues raised by the questions was difficult for

the young people to do in the first person – they were too close both to the young person who had been murdered and the young person who had been charged with his murder. Out of their conversations, an idea for a film emerged which the young people would script and act in it with the support of a professional script writer and film maker paid for by the local authority. Even though the prison was supportive, the process of getting access to and filming the prisoners was lengthy and complicated, needing Helen to, in effect, act as their administrator. Eventually however the youth workers met the prisoners, they posed the young people’s questions to the prisoners, were filmed and this became part of their film. At no time did any young people from the centre come into contact with any of the offenders.

Based on the young people’s reactions to and feelings about the most recent murder, a central focus for the film emerged: the impact of someone being stabbed on those around them, on all those whose lives would never be the same again. This very process provided some catharsis for the young people as their emotions were acted out and their feelings put into words and actions. It was therefore never mainly an exercise in learning drama, film making, editing, acting or writing – though learning about all of these did happen. Though these proved important vehicles they were never ends in themselves – as for example accreditation targets would have made them. None of the young people got a certificate – something that would have been a first for many of them who had been expelled from school.

The film itself centres on a young man involved in a knife crime and the impact of this on his family. The words of the mother are the actual words of Jack’s mother, the young prisoner who wrote the open letter. She tells how it feels to have that empty place at the table and her struggle to deal with the stigma of having a son in prison, her lost dreams and hopes for her child. It is a powerful message of loss and grief. The youth workers took great care to use the evidence of the mother and to incorporate it accurately, constantly seeking to strike a balance between compassion for the victim and his family and sympathy for the family of the attacker. Jack’s mum’s words are used over footage of the prison cell and visiting room.

Although for youth workers what was always most important was the process of making the film, its release is to be celebrated by the youth centre in a big way. A private cinema will be hired and the young people who acted in the film will be chauffeured to the event and appropriate evening wear hired. The film will then be distributed to Youth Offending Teams and other youth centres. Jack has been further involved in creating music for the film.

All this activity and its 'outcome', flowing from that one observation in the park, would have been impossible to predict. It wasn't in the youth centre's business plan – though the work certainly became visible through its relevance in the community. In the process the youth centre took on a significance which wasn't easy to detect from a distance – something especially true of a neighbourhood like Greenville which is physically on the periphery of the town and many of whose young people are themselves on the periphery. In this sense the youth centre is the last nerve ending. Close it and you lose the feel for what's going on the edges of your society – which was precisely what was being proposed for the youth centre at the heart of this story while it was unfolding.

We are in a youth centre no different from youth centres up and down the country. This one was there, it was warm, you didn't need money to come in and – other than the street or a friend's home where there wouldn't be much privacy – it was a place to be with people you knew. Perhaps only a youth centre could have provided the space and opportunity for what follows.

☹ to ☺:

### Pen and paper youth work

Anne was fifteen. On this particular evening she looked subdued and withdrawn, making little contact with the other young people. Something was clearly affecting her but her shrug suggested that she did not want to talk. It was a dismissal of both Grace (the youth worker) and the topic.

During the evening Grace created an opportunity for sitting next to Anne. Rather than talking, she passed her a note asking if she was ok. Anne responded by writing a note back saying she was feeling down, things were not all well at home – that she was really struggling. She signed the note with a sad face, ☹. Through a series of small points of clarification in the notes that followed Anne, bit by bit, was able to reveal her struggles. Open questions were avoided or ignored by Anne who was too sussed for that: she saw them as disrespectful, an insult to her intelligence. For Anne the problems were too big to bring out in one go.

Though it wasn't emotionally and physically possible to do that, the small pieces of clarification that Grace asked for seemed to be respected and responded to. Grace used the clarifications to show she was interested, that she cared and – both as a



youth worker but also as a parent herself – that maybe she even understood a little of what was happening to Anne. When it became clear that her relationship with her mother and father was strained, one of Grace’s responses was that she was a mother as well and that as a parent she didn’t always get it right.

As the exchanges of notes continued other worries came out – about the pressure to have a boyfriend and how she felt about herself. All this took place without a spoken word between the two of them. At the end of the evening Grace wrote another note asking Anne how she was feeling. Her response was to draw a ☺ – an improvement on the ☹ where she’d started.

No more was thought or said about this exchange. Though infrequently, Anne continued to visit the centre, then eventually stopped coming altogether and contact was lost. A couple of years later Anne saw Grace in the town centre. She approached her smiling, asked how she was and about the youth centre. She was studying in College and enjoying the course. Anne asked whether Grace remembered their exchange of notes, to which Grace replied that of course she did. Anne thought for a moment and then, looking directly at Grace, said that on that evening she was feeling so low that she was thinking of self harming but that their ‘conversation’ had stopped her. She then said thank you, and ‘seeya’.

### **The power of graffiti:**

#### **From detached youth work via drop-in to youth strategy**

Even though a lot of adults were drinking in the town centre, complaints to the council were mainly about young people. The young people got on well together, even sometimes with as many as seventy five of them gathering there, but they were constantly being moved on and threatened with ASBOs. The police assumed they were all from one area though it turned out that they actually came from all over the town.

Prompted by police evidence of ‘anti-social behaviour’ incidents over one summer month, the Youth Service’s street-based team of youth workers was called in by a referral from the anti-social behaviour team, the police and the council. Some conversations with the young people opened up because some of them knew some of the youth workers from their estates; others however had never met any of them before. The workers were aware of not overstaying their welcome – starting from the

position that they were guests in the young people's space and that it was a privilege that young people let them come into it. As at first there was a bit of a barrier, they needed to work consciously to find common ground.

Over a couple of weeks the youth workers began to get to know the young people, working to build a climate where they might be willing to engage more personally with them. For one week they just sat with them in the church yard, focusing on them, listening to what they had to say. (As one of the youth workers commented: 'You have two ears and one mouth. Use them in that proportion'). As part of these conversations, over 100 young people were asked why they came to the town centre and what they and other young people liked and didn't like about it. The youth workers also gave out leaflets informing young people of their stop-and-search rights as well as information on drugs, including alcohol which was easily available to the young people.

In response to the questions, many of the young people said they were there simply to meet their friends and to socialise. When asked directly what they would like to do, the response of one young person was: 'You're the only people who've ever actually asked us that'. They said they were sick of sitting in the church yard and would like somewhere to go – like a drop-in. As one young person suggested doing a graffiti workshop, the youth workers brought in a graffiti artist – also a youth worker – who offered a workshop in the town centre. On the first day he practised graffiti techniques with the young people, persuading them that they could draw and that it was OK to make mistakes. The workshop was designed to allow all the young people to develop – not just 'the best'.

The actual graffiti – pictures on boards – told the story of why the young people came to the town centre. Questions were added – such as why were young people being ignored – which were then presented to councillors. Though it took time to get a response, with the support of their manager the youth workers eventually took over a town centre office from 4-9pm on Saturdays, setting up a drop-in which attracted up to seventy five young people. The young people asked for trips and computer games and did a Hallowe'en project.

As some of the young people didn't want to come into the building where the drop-in was being run, one of the youth workers – a young woman volunteer – went to them to find out what might get them involved. They talked more easily to her, saying they wanted something that was bigger and had pool tables. Other town centre premises were then opened up which also had media workshop space. However, conversations with young people not using the drop-in remained an on-going part of the process.

Though the youth workers never saw themselves as ‘controllers’ or ‘enforcers’, the police were pleased with the drop-in and impressed by the impact of the work, as anti-social behaviour reduced. When they first stopped by to have a cup of chocolate, the young people wanted to leave. Having been persuaded to stay, they then challenged the police – for example on their use of terms such as ‘undesirables’.

The project was seen as having a number of other different outcomes – some intended, some unintended, with different agencies recognising and valuing different impacts. It was not however easy to provide recorded outcomes of a key element of the project – the conversations between the young people and the youth workers.

The young people from the Town Centre are about to be involved in meeting Councillors, the police and the Anti-Social Behaviour Team to produce a Town Youth Strategy. This will be aimed at young people with an interest in skateboarding and BMX riding, with the focus of provision being opened up for these young people in the town centre.

## Practising

Each of these five accounts of youth work in action has sought to allow the practice to tell its own story – about how it is carried out and (sometimes) how it impacts on young people. All also take as read the workers’ often long experience and internalised skills rooted in a training emphasising self-awareness and self-reflection.

Yet none of these narratives adds up to a straightforward success story with predictable measured outcomes. The worker who supported a distressed young woman by passing notes had no idea whether her intervention had had any effect until, entirely by accident, the two met two years later. The girls on the street did not instantly stop annoying other young people just because detached workers got involved. Though such involvement continued over months or years, one of this group still found herself in a custodial institution, a black young man was still repeatedly stopped and searched by the local police, some young people were still reluctant to use a newly opened drop-in. Most starkly, and tragically, even as a youth work project on carrying knives was under way, one young man was killed, another in custody charged with his murder.

Running through the stories, however, some repeating and inter-related themes illuminate what makes youth work ‘work’, what might count as an ‘outcome’ and how this practice might have achieved this. Though none stands alone or makes ‘success’ inevitable, some of these key ‘indicators’ are worth capturing.

*The setting*

For youth work, setting is crucial. Not just setting as physical space – youth club, estate, town centre square – into which youth workers are privileged to be invited. The spaces are also social and cultural, in powerful if still of course limited ways young people-owned. Here, for months, they choose not to look a youth worker in the eye. Here too they decide whether the police may come in – or not. The safety attributed by workers to these spaces often depends for young people as much on these qualities as on protections from violence or abuse.

*From improvisation to creativity*

Within relatively loose organisational and bureaucratic structures these spaces allow workers a room for manoeuvre which at least implicitly legitimises and even sometimes encourages creativity through improvisation. In them an adult ‘authority’ can, off-the-cuff, conduct a lengthy and sensitive conversation with a touchy young woman entirely through written notes; or, out of a casual wordless off-duty encounter with a young man, generate a lengthy and complex script writing, drama and film making ‘project’. Within such environments, too, proactively and without it being experienced as disrespectful, workers can challenge young people – focusing them hard on how to stop local young men knifing each other, advising against a particular career choice, providing information on drugs and alcohol.

*With and through groups ...*

Precisely because such spaces are so substantially young people’s spaces, most of the youth work occurs within and through their peer groups. This certainly involves recognising how these can limit, even damage, individuals within them – supporting norms of heavy drinking or knife-carrying. Youth work however also seeks out and embraces their strengths – their solidarities, collective identities and resources. Without these how could a group of young people, many black, even consider taking on police harassment? How could young women deeply at odds with their community end up as members of their local youth forum with self-images and aspirations so shifted that, paradoxically, three years later they no longer need the group? How could young people, in search of town centre sociability and fun, open themselves up to a graffiti artist, make demands on their local council, contribute to a local youth strategy?

*... to individuals ...*

Also paradoxically, some of the stories also illustrate how it is these group encounters which, without elaborate assessment frameworks or referral procedures, provide individuals with safe and self-chosen routes to emotional learning or very practical support. For some the gains are

just feeling affirmed, their dignity restored, no longer seeing themselves as ‘scum’. Beyond this however young women get impromptu ‘counselling’ when on the verge of self-harming or after living for years with the trauma of seeing a brother beaten up by the police; and a young black man gets a bus pass to help protect him from police harassment.

*... via complex communication ...*

The young people-worker communication which feeds these relationships is often subtle, complex and sometimes barely (if at all) dependent on words, with, as one of them puts it, workers using two ears and one mouth in that proportion. Detached workers spend a week just listening to young people, asking them – for the first time apparently – what they think and want. A whole intimate conversation is carried by an exchange of written notes. The gait of a young man betrays to the worker that he is carrying a knife. The most significant ‘content’ of the follow up is what is not said – but mutually understood. Indeed, the very success of these ‘conversations’ may depend on a tricky judgement that, here and now and despite the risks involved, words might be unhelpful, even damaging.

*... in the ‘community’*

Moreover, within such communication may be the potential for influential messages to wider audiences. For marginalised young people and marginalised estates, a youth club may act as a community’s ‘last nerve ending – close it down and you lose the feel for what’s going on’. Some of the stories illustrate other benefits from these community roots – as when workers coming fresh into the impersonality of a town centre are known to some young people from contacts in their home area.

This ‘community’, however, may look very different from the harmonious entity of slick Big Society rhetoric. It is after all in a park close to the youth centre that a youth worker first realises a centre member is carrying a knife – an increasingly de-harmonising feature of this community. And, though for them community roots are vital, a highly disruptive group of young women need to take a long bumpy youth work journey before, in the eyes of other residents, they find anything like a positive place within it.

*From the professional to the personal*

Even for workers not living in the area where they work these community roots can also blur professional – personal boundaries. A phone call may intrude on a Boxing Day meal. ‘As a mother’, one worker may choose to tell a young woman, ‘I make mistakes.’ And when crucial ‘intelligence’ is picked up during a family expedition to the local park does the worker use it and if so how?

Because theirs is ‘not just a job’, by ‘going the extra mile’, youth workers are always liable to be operating very close to such boundaries.

### *Activities – vehicles or ends in themselves*

Some of these stories also illustrate youth work’s complicated relationship with ‘activities’. Graffiti art, drama and film-making, litter-picking and gardening projects – youth work’s conventional wisdom says these are to be valued primarily as vehicles for carrying young people on testing personal and emotional journeys. None, at least initially, is selected as an end in itself – and certainly not because it might lead to an accredited outcome.

Yet as the work develops, such tasks may grow in significance. How effective, the young people and the workers start to ask, will this artwork be in convincing local councillors to open up a new town centre facility? Can we make this script, our acting, the filming powerful enough to convince other young people not to carry knives? Sometimes, it turns out, ensuring personal and emotional gains which the young people own are contradictorily inter-twined with achieving a high quality product.

### *Working in partnership*

At moments these stories also give us glimpses into ‘partnership-working’ – like ‘community’, another apparently self-evident ‘good’. Yet, especially when the police are the potential partners, here too the realities can be much more complicated. Though none were chosen specifically for this reason, three of the stories demonstrate how hard youth workers have to work to ensure that cross-agency relationships operate in young people’s interests, not least– to fulfil one of youth work’s core commitments – to help tip some balances of power in their favour.

### *And management?*

The ‘graffiti’ and, less explicitly, the ‘knife crime’ stories are encouraging for youth workers in showing internal managerial and financial systems, at least up to 2009-10, actively supporting the face-to-face work – though by the time the latter was recorded the youth centre’s very existence was threatened. The example of the girls’ group, however, suggests something altogether different: that insofar as there is ‘impact’, it may be achieved in spite of the work’s management.

Which is precisely why the In Defence of Youth Work campaign sought forms of evidence on youth work practice better able to grapple with its complexities and imponderables and with the elusiveness of many of its ‘outcomes’.

## Acknowledgements

Particularly to the workers who provided the stories.

To others in the In Defence of Youth Work campaign who have written them up, edited them and contributed to drafting this article.

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# Struggles and silences: Policy, Youth Work and the National Citizen Service

Tania de St Croix

## Abstract

*Leading education policy researchers argue that policy is best understood as a process of contestation and struggle. This theory is particularly convincing at a time when youth workers and young people are protesting against student fees, spending cuts and youth club closures, and while services for young people are debated by a parliamentary select committee. In this context the relative lack of controversy over the Coalition Government's 'new idea' for youth work is interesting. This article explores the National Citizen Service through discussion of its political context, the process of its production, how language is used to describe and support it, and how it may be contested in practice. It concludes that policy processes can involve silences as well as struggle and contestation.*

**Key words:** Youth work; education policy; youth policy; National Citizen Service; neo-liberalism.

**T**HIS ARTICLE was written against a backdrop of visible struggle over education and youth policy in England. The winter of 2010/2011 saw university and college students demonstrating on the streets and occupying lecture theatres in opposition to raised university tuition fees and the cancellation of the Education Maintenance Allowance. School pupils and teachers petitioned and protested, with some success, against the proposed withdrawal of School Sports Partnerships. As spring arrives, youth workers and young people are taking part in demonstrations, rallies and public meetings to oppose cuts to youth services, many also questioning and challenging some of the dominant youth work practices of recent years (Taylor, 2011a; 2011b; In Defence of Youth Work, 2011).

Such events illustrate that policy can be understood as a process of contestation and struggle, rather than a straightforward system of governmental problem solving (Ozga, 2000; Ball, 2008a). And yet street protest is hardly the norm in the UK, and some policies appear to be implemented with little debate or opposition. To consider this issue further this article explores the Coalition Government's only 'new idea' for youth work, the National Citizen Service (NCS). The policy has received limited critical attention from practitioners, academics or the media (although see Belton, 2011 and Anonymous, 2010). Representatives of national youth organisations welcomed the NCS as a 'good idea' at a government select committee hearing, questioning it mainly on practical grounds.<sup>1</sup> In comparison to the current debates and protest over the direction and funding of existing youth work, this relative silence over the NCS makes it an interesting case study of whether policy is best understood as a process of contestation and struggle.



The NCS is proposed as a structured two-month programme for year 11 school-leavers. It consists of a week-long challenging residential away from home, a second week of working in their community while living together locally, and the following weeks planning and carrying out a social action task (Cabinet Office, 2010). It is named as a flagship initiative of the ‘Big Society’ and rather ambitiously aims to achieve a more cohesive, responsible and engaged society (Conservative Party, 2010a). A pilot of the NCS will take place later this year for ten thousand young people, funded by central government and carried out by independent organisations. Young people can choose whether or not to participate, but the government hopes the scheme will eventually attract every sixteen year old in Britain. It is presented as the idea of David Cameron who first spoke about it in 2005 before he was elected party leader (Conservative Party, 2010a).

As I will be exploring the values and interests behind this policy, it makes no sense to obscure my own. During the writing of this article I have demonstrated against student fees and cuts to youth work, and contributed to the critical youth workers’ network ‘In Defence of Youth Work’. As a practitioner I attempt to contest intrusive monitoring procedures in my workplace, challenge authoritarian practices and support young people to have a say on issues affecting them. My understanding of policy as a process of contestation and struggle resonates with my beliefs and comes close to my experience; focusing on the NCS as a relatively uncontroversial policy is a way to challenge this understanding. This article will consider the presence and absence of contestation and struggle over the NCS in terms of this policy’s context, production, language, and practice.

## Struggle and contestation in context

The distinction between ‘struggle’ and ‘contestation’ is more often implied than explained. Struggle suggests overt political action, while contestation encompasses more subtle forms of rebellion which are not always consciously political. The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS, 1981) distinguished between struggle *within* schooling, which involves classroom and school-based action by teachers and children, and wider political disputes which are struggle over schooling. It seems plausible to redefine struggle within educational establishments as contestation, except that this tends to assume some groups are inherently less politicised than others. If a teachers’ strike over schooling is a struggle, why should a children’s strike within a school be categorised as contestation? If youth workers are contesting when they oppose the implementation of policy at a staff meeting, surely civil servants arguing over similar points in a Whitehall office are also contesting despite not being in a youth club. For the purposes of this article I will define struggle as action in the public domain (including demonstrations, petitions, public debate, strikes and occupations, wherever they take place) and contestation as action confined to a closed group or institution (such as a policy-making arena, classroom, youth club, or staff meeting).

This article's focus on the NCS does not mean to imply that it has a discrete identity or exists in isolation. Policies are part of a realm of power which not only shapes discourse but is also shaped by it, making it important to explore the wider context in which they have been produced (Walton, 2010). The NCS and the Big Society agenda draw on neo-liberal, neo-conservative and social democratic discourses and interests. This analysis is influenced by Gramsci's concept of hegemony as it has been interpreted and developed by critical education theorists. Gramsci argues that dominant powers win the consent of the population not just by using state power but through culture and institutions including the media and education (CCCS, 1981). The ultimate aim of this struggle is to secure 'the long-term social conditions for the continuing reproduction of capital' (Hall et al, 1978:218). Apple (2004) explains hegemony as the process by which political norms can saturate our consciousness, until it seems like our materialist way of living in the world is the only one we can imagine.

Apple (2006) argues that there has been a global move to the right in education policy, supported by a political alliance of which neo-liberals and neo-conservatives are the most influential. Such merging of different ideological elements can be understood as a policy settlement: a 'putting together of a dominant alliance of forces, and a more widespread recruitment of popular support or inducement of popular indifference' (CCCS, 1981:32). Settlements can be disrupted by popular protest and economic and political forces, and are therefore a product of struggle and contestation as well as an attempt to silence it. It is perhaps too early to tell whether the coalition government heralds a new settlement or is a continuation of New Labour's 'third way', in which education policy was influenced by a contradictory combination of neo-liberalism, authoritarianism and humanism (Gewirtz, 2002). These strands can be identified in current government policy, albeit with different emphases and manifestations.

Neo-liberalism is the belief in the central importance of economic rationality in which the state's role is to further business and financial interests. The implications for education are marketisation, where children and parents are treated as consumers and schools compete for their custom, and state investment which is conditional on the development of a work-related curriculum and increased business partnerships (Apple, 2006; Ball, 2008a; Gewirtz, 2002). The Big Society agenda is clearly influenced by neo-liberalism, being contrasted with 'big government' and involving a reduced role for the welfare state and the contracting out of services to 'entrepreneurs' and private companies (Cameron, 2009). In keeping with this philosophy, the National Citizen Service will be run by private or voluntary organisations rather than local authority youth services, and businesses are envisaged as having a key role in funding, advising and providing volunteer mentors (Conservative Party, 2010a).

Conservative Party policies are equally underpinned by neo-conservatism which has similarities with New Labour's authoritarianism. Both are characterised by a strong and controlling state, with the former underpinned by 'a clear sense of loss – a loss of faith, of imagined communities, of a nearly pastoral vision of like-minded people who shared norms and values and in which the "Western

tradition” reigned supreme’ (Apple, 2006:40). The Big Society agenda attempts to conjure up a golden age of ‘Britishness’ where neighbours helped each other and organised their own affairs. The NCS is explicitly intended to instil such values in young people, and was initially presented as a form of National Service which apparently ‘helped prepare young people for adult life, as well as bringing Britain together in one shared, classless, patriotic mission’ (Conservative Party, 2007:1). The idea of a week of military training disappears from later NCS proposals, but the rose-tinted view of a classless National Service remains: the programme intends to ‘share the same spirit as national service in that it would bring together people from different backgrounds and different parts of the country as they stood on the cusp of adulthood’ (Conservative Party, 2010a:1). Far from being egalitarian, the NCS has upper class origins, inspired by Cameron’s time at Eton where he joined the cadets and ‘did visits to elderly, vulnerable people in Windsor’ (Cameron in Winnett and Kirkup, 2010).

Just as Blair was seen as a relatively right-wing Labour politician, Cameron is viewed as a centrist Conservative. The NCS may partly serve to mollify the right wing of Cameron’s party, linking him personally with traditional values. But there are also more humanistic or social democratic aims such as ‘bringing young people of different social, religious and ethnic backgrounds together’ (Conservative Party, 2010a:8). Such values are not traditionally associated with the Conservative Party, and yet it was they who introduced free schooling in 1944 and perhaps benefited most from the post-war welfare settlement (Hall et al, 1978). Social democracy and the formation of the welfare state can be understood either as a victory for the working classes and progressive elements of the middle classes, or as part of a settlement which smoothed the acceptance of massive austerity measures to prop up capitalism after the war (Hall et al, 1978).

Churchill’s government made free secondary education its great social democratic gesture; today’s politics tend to be more subtle and complex, and a policy such as the NCS is simultaneously presented as business-like, traditional and democratic. By appealing to a range of interests, policy can silence controversy or at least limit its effects. And yet, policy settlements can be understood as ‘highly unstable and deeply contradictory arrangements which easily pass into crises’ (CCCS, 1981:32). In the 1940s, the welfare state and full employment were a necessary social cost which ‘secured just the measure of popular legitimacy the revival of capitalism required’ (Hall et al., 1978: 229). Cameron’s Big Society is perhaps intended to perform the same function of winning support for massive cuts to state services in the wake of the banking crisis. In this way the NCS is both a pragmatic compromise and an embodiment of contesting ideologies from within and outside the Conservative Party. I will now explore more specifically how this policy was produced.

## Policy production: who is involved?

In recent years there has been a shift from policy created within government to a more complex

process involving key individuals and organisations from private, voluntary and state sectors, meaning ‘it is sometimes difficult to know which voices count most, or where and how key decisions are arrived at’ (Ball, 2008a:201). Perhaps to offset potential criticisms of the National Citizen Service as Cameron’s vanity project (Mycock, 2010), the use of outside advisers was presented as one of its strengths from the beginning:

*We will be directly advised by young people themselves and I’m delighted that representatives of youth organisations as well as leading figures from commerce and the public sector have agreed to work with us to ensure this vision can become a reality. The precise details... have to be decided by the experts, who know what works.*

(Cameron in Conservative Party, 2007:2).

Who are these experts? A key individual is Paul Oginsky, an ex-member of the SAS appointed by Cameron to take the NCS idea forward through a short-lived charity, the Young Adult Trust (YAT). Oginsky had earlier worked with Falklands veteran Simon Weston to set up Weston Spirit, an organisation lauded as being ‘widely recognised as an effective and forward-thinking organisation’ (YAT, 2006), but which has since closed due to lack of funds. YAT (2006:2) presented its leader both as a ‘normal person’ who came up with the idea for youth training courses on a beer mat, and as an exceptional social entrepreneur with ‘energy and drive’. He is youth policy advisor to Cameron and is involved in one of Cameron’s favourite charities, Tomorrow’s People (Hillier, 2011; Children and Young People Now [CYPN], 2010). Oginsky remains official advisor to the NCS although his Young Adult Trust was officially wound down in March 2008.

Rising from its ashes a year later came the Challenge Trust, set up through the Shaftesbury Partnership founded by Nat Wei, another key government advisor who also co-founded Teach First (CYPN, 2010). The Challenge Trust was specifically set up to run programmes ‘resembling’ the NCS (Mahadeven, 2009), and was subsequently named as the lead provider after the pilot programmes were put out to tender in autumn 2010. The Trust’s founders are three businessmen: Craig Morley, who previously worked at Proctor and Gamble and Rio Tinto; Doug Fraley, who worked at Google and McKinsey and as an infantry officer in the US army; and Jon Yates, who also worked at McKinsey (Challenge Trust, undated). Proctor and Gamble and Rio Tinto are huge transnational corporations accused of unfair working conditions and environmental devastation (Corporate Watch, 2010), while McKinsey is a multinational consultancy company which ‘crops up several times’ in educational policy networks (Ball, 2008b:753).

When business – oriented individuals hold powerful positions in policy networks it is difficult to decide ‘where business ends and philanthropy or public service begins and to what extent philanthropy is a means of influence’ (Ball, 2008b:752). The Challenge Trust is constituted as a charity so is required to have volunteer trustees. As well as three more white men with corporate

backgrounds, the trustees also include the director of the Scout Association, one white woman (the only trustee whose marital status and children are mentioned), one black man ('an emerging young entrepreneur') and two young people who have completed an NCS pilot programme (Challenge Trust, undated). Ball (2008b:757) argues that "'ordinary" actors serve an important discursive purpose. They demonstrate that public reform is possible; that it works'. The implied normality of some of these trustees does not mean that they come from disadvantaged backgrounds: for example, one of the young representatives attends a fee-paying independent school and the other a high-status academy. I do not wish to detract from the contribution of volunteers, particularly young people who are usually excluded from policy processes; this analysis is not intended as personal criticism but aims to show how policy networks can reinforce inequalities even when they purport to do the opposite.

By the time of the 2010 general election the NCS had been in policy development for five years and involved David Cameron personally as well as various 'experts', young people, and two different charities set up primarily for this purpose. This process was not neutral: complex policy networks can 'serve as a policy device, as a way of trying things out, getting things done quickly, disembedding entrenched new practices, and avoiding established public sector lobbies and interests' (Ball, 2008a:157). Of twelve organisations commissioned to run the pilot NCS schemes, Bolton Lads and Girls Club is the only well-established community-based youth work organisation, given less than a tenth of the number of spaces granted to the Challenge Network (Jozwiak, 2010). Local authorities were allowed very little role in the production of this policy and were not invited to tender, despite their significant contribution to services for young people since the Albemarle Report fifty years ago (Davies, 1999).

By restricting participation in the policy's production the Conservative Party reduce potential contestation, and only one significant issue of disagreement is acknowledged. Cameron had originally intended the scheme to be compulsory but did not receive widespread support for this, changing his mind because 'youth leaders told me that would have been the kiss of death' (Conservative Party, 2010a:1). Perhaps financial constraints also played a part although these are not mentioned. A curious compromise was reached whereby young people's participation was to be voluntary but it was hoped that 'over time, all 16-year-olds will take part' (Conservative Party, 2010a:3). Conservative London Mayor Boris Johnson failed to stay 'on message' while electioneering at the Chelsea Barracks, telling Cameron publicly that he should have made it compulsory (Sparrow, 2010). In this instance, contestation is presented as friendly disagreement over the practical matter of how to achieve young people's involvement, as if the only problem with compulsion is that it would make the scheme 'uncool'. Excluded from this debate is the more important principle of a young person's right to decide how they spend their free time and the resultant implications for power relations with adults, especially given the ideologically imperialist, class-ridden and gendered nature of the programme's origins.

Debate over the NCS has been limited or managed throughout its production, and yet it is presented as the product of negotiation; the initial proposal was even described as being ‘very much in the form of a Green Paper’ (Conservative Party, 2007:5).<sup>2</sup> Fairclough (2000) argued that New Labour called for debate but only through means it could control, viewing people as consumers of policy rather than citizens who might influence it. The Conservative-led coalition appears to have built on this tactic by involving and commissioning their favoured organisations while presenting the process as genuine consultation. The tender was announced as ‘a unique opportunity for organisations to work in partnership with government to deliver the National Citizen Service pilot, and to influence the future design of NCS for delivery in 2012 and beyond’ (Cabinet Office, 2010). But how open is an opportunity that privileges white male entrepreneurs and excludes whole sections of government and society? In such a closed context individual elements of a policy might be contested, but its ideological underpinnings are likely to remain intact.

## Policy language

In this section I will look at elements of struggle and contestation embodied in the language of key NCS policy texts including speeches and websites. I will explore these documents using tools from critical discourse analysis, an explicitly anti-capitalist method of analysing texts in relation to their surrounding discourses (Fairclough, 2010). Such analysis is important because ‘discourses mobilise truth claims and constitute rather than simply reflect social reality’ (Ball, 2008:5). For example, the NCS texts use language to represent young people and youth projects in ideologically driven ways, and act to limit contestation and struggle.

The young people targeted by the National Citizen Service are sixteen years old, perceived as being in transition from childhood to adulthood. Youth transitions are longer and less secure than they were in the past, particularly for those young people who have less successful school careers (Maguire, 2009; Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). Although complex transitions are perhaps unlikely to be substantially improved by a few weeks of outdoor activities and voluntary work, the National Citizen Service is presented as ‘the nationally recognised transition to adulthood programme’ (YAT, 2006:6). In recent years this age group has appeared in the media over issues including inner city gun and knife crime, anti-social behaviour, educational standards and ‘violent’ student demonstrations, often designated as NEETs<sup>3</sup>, teen parents or young offenders. Cameron’s introduction to the NCS policy proposal is inter-discursive, containing some of these elements:

*The young of this country are as passionate and idealistic as any before. Perhaps more passionate. They march against poverty, they set up online campaigns, they push their parents to recycle and they care deeply about climate change.*

*But too many of our young people appear lost. Their lives lack shape or any sense of direction. So they take out their frustrations and boredom on the world around them. They get involved with gangs. They smash up the neighbourhood. They turn to drink and drugs.*  
(Conservative Party, 2010a:1).

Cameron's contrasting paragraphs reproduce a well established dichotomous discourse of young people as angels or devils, citizens or troublemakers (Moss and Petrie, 2002). The first group are presented as trainee members of the Big Society, caring and willing to take action but preferably on uncontroversial causes such as recycling and non-specific poverty. The second group are at first merely lost and directionless, but the word 'so' implies that this leads inevitably to gangs, vandalism, drinking and drugs. The document later refers to the 'hard-to-reach' who 'will not be given any dispensation for unacceptable behaviour. Hard-to-reach young people should be encouraged to take part... on a level playing field with everyone else' (Conservative Party, 2010a:11). The collocation of 'hard-to-reach' and 'unacceptable behaviour' is no accident: this group is being set up to fail. There are echoes here of historical notions of the deserving and undeserving poor as well as a more modern meritocratic framework which obscures the complex causes and consequences of inequality.

The texts present an equally hazy focus on social mixing, on learning 'to get on and get along with people from different backgrounds' (Cameron, 2009). This is mentioned unproblematically, as if getting on with others is a simple matter of meeting and doing things together. Any young person who is shy, has been bullied, feels 'different' or has experienced racism or homophobia may feel nervous about the idea of two residential weeks with a group of unknown peers and adults. And well they might, because it is they who must adapt rather than the participants from majority groups. This is apparent in the NCS's military roots and its focus on skills like leadership and teamwork that have always been held differentially by young men and young women, by working-class and middle-class young people, and by disabled and able-bodied young people. This policy seems to be predicated on an archetypal young person who is male, confident, physically able, heterosexual and classless – that is, any class as long as he is prepared to abide by the ruling-class derived rules.

The NCS documents present a familiar old-fashioned and simplified view of youth activities in which young people's lives are turned around through a challenging team experience. There is little notion of the role of skilled workers in building positive relationships with and between young people as there are to be different adults involved in each element of the scheme, many of them volunteers (Conservative Party, 2010a). The concept of youth work is absent and workers are referred to as 'youth leaders' (Conservative Party, 2010a:1), a term long seen in the profession as non-egalitarian. The NCS aims to set young people a 'challenging mission' and 'take them out of their comfort zone' (Conservative Party, 2007:1). Such language invokes a certain type of traditional youth organisation with militaristic and colonialist origins (Boehmer, 2005), except

that alongside this neo-conservative discourse is a neo-liberal one using business language. The NCS will be ‘delivered’ by organisations ‘commissioned’ through ‘competitive tendering’ (Cabinet Office, 2010), and is marketed as an ‘offer’ and an ‘opportunity’ (Conservative Party, 2007:1). Such language is now so normal that it seems almost quaint to comment, but it betrays a cultural change in the voluntary youth work sector. Projects were once developed from community needs but are now more often commissioned from central government, to be ‘delivered’ to young consumers as an already packaged product.

Language works to ‘highlight certain things as “real” problems while marginalising others’ (Apple, 2006:9) The major problem marginalised by its absence in these policy texts is the threatened funding of existing youth work organisations. The only services for young people listed on the Department for Education website are the NCS and a small scheme to involve independent schools in promoting cadet forces to state schools (Department for Education, 2010). The Conservative Party (2010a:12) wants the NCS ‘to enhance the capacity of the youth sector in Britain’, but the scheme is not fully funded, with providers, participants and even schools expected to contribute. The £50million funding for the pilot has been taken directly from the Prevent Programme (Conservative Party, 2010a:13) which for all its faults (see Kundnani, 2009) was a funder of Muslim community and youth organisations. It is unclear how the organisations providing the National Citizen Scheme will have their capacity enhanced, let alone the wider youth sector which is expected to lose at least half of its core funding through spending cuts (FPM, 2010). The NCS advisor puts the blame on youth workers: ‘If youth work is being closed down, then youth workers aren’t communicating how effective and beneficial youth work is’. (Oginsky in Hillier, 2011)

Policy texts can reduce opposition by disarming opponents, appropriating oppositional space and giving the impression of responsive government (Centre for Public Policy Research, 2002:16). By claiming the idea as his own, writing personal introductions to NCS policy documents and linking it to personal attributes like his ‘natural optimism’ (Conservative Party, 2007:1), Cameron makes it impossible for anyone in his party to dispute the NCS without challenging him personally. He attempts to attract support from both left and right by invoking real and recognised problems as evidence in favour of the Big Society, speaking for example about New Labour’s belief that, ‘every issue demanded government intervention and every problem could be solved by a state solution’ (Cameron, 2009). This has the ring of truth, not just for small-state neo-liberals but for those people working in public services who experienced a seemingly endless stream of new policies, initiatives and targets (Ball, 2008a). Obscuring the issues further, the policy texts invoke heroes and theorists of the left, including Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama, Mahatma Gandhi, Saul Alinsky, Richard Wilkinson and Katie Pickett.<sup>4</sup> Like Blair before him, Cameron uses language consciously and tactically to limit opposition; this strategy has been defined as the technologisation of discourse, ‘part of a struggle on the part of dominant social forces to modify existing institutional discursive practices’ (Fairclough, 2010:126).



## Contestation in practice

So far I have presented a picture of a policy designed to restrict contestation and struggle, but I do not wish to suggest that practitioners and young people are passive in relation to these processes. Sites of educational practice are places where policy is ‘much contested, both consciously and unconsciously’ (Jones, 2003:5). Informed by Foucault’s (1979) theories of micro power relations, Thomas and Davies (2005) argue that some welfare-state workers resist domination through everyday practices such as speaking out against practices they disagree with and developing oppositional identities. Young people also take everyday action against education provision, often through non-participation or disruption (Humphries, 1981; Willis, 1977). The National Citizen Service is a new policy so we can only speculate on how it will be enacted and resisted in specific situations, although there are clues in an evaluation of last year’s Challenge Trust programme (Innovative Routes to Learning and Applied Educational Research Centre [IRL and AERC], 2010). The Conservative Party (2010a:7) interpret this evaluation as showing the trial NCS scheme was ‘highly successful’; I take a different view.

The evaluation report must be used with caution because it was commissioned by the Conservative Party and seems to accept the Party’s and the Challenge Trust’s aims as unproblematic (IRL and AERC, 2010:5-6). There is no room to analyse it in detail, but of particular relevance is the scheme’s impact on young people’s participation in their community. The evaluators report mixed success in terms of this community involvement, with ‘those from “rougher” areas perhaps less likely to feel a sustained positive impact is possible’ (ibid:3). The designation of some areas as ‘rough’ implies class bias by the researchers and is used throughout. The methodology included questionnaires which were administered at the start of the programme, after the three-week full-time section, and on completion of community volunteering. Only six young people completed all three questionnaires, so the researchers focus on differences between the first and second questionnaires which were completed by 107 and 47 participants respectively (ibid:7). In these questionnaires, participants were given sets of two statements and asked which they most agreed with. The pairs of statements included:

1. *In the long run people get the respect they deserve in this world.*
  2. *Unfortunately, an individual’s worth often passes unrecognised no matter how hard they try. (ibid:7-8).*
1. *The average citizen can have an influence in government decisions.*
  2. *This world is run by the few people in power, and there is not much ordinary people can do about it. (ibid:9).*

The researchers believe that increased numbers agreeing with the first in each pair of statements would show participants had gained ‘more control over their own lives and more able to make a difference in their community’ (ibid:7). But the statements are ideologically loaded, the preferred statements subscribing to a meritocratic philosophy. There is no recognition that community involvement can bring an increased awareness of inequality and injustice which might result in agreement with the more pessimistic statements.

The evaluation concludes that middle-class young people were ‘more pro-active’ (ibid:3) in the programme and gained most in terms of developing leadership skills, teamwork skills and future motivation to take part in community projects (ibid:33,47). The researchers acknowledge that ‘pro-active’ participants were more likely to complete questionnaires, perhaps giving an unnaturally positive picture (ibid:46). They could have added that this implies that working-class participants are under-represented in the findings, and that the low response rate to the second and third questionnaires could suggest a loss of motivation as the scheme progressed. It would have been interesting if the evaluators had spoken to those who dropped out or were excluded or less committed.

While the evaluation report is broadly positive about the NCS, its findings hint at future resistance, perhaps by working-class young people disillusioned with the moralising overtones of the scheme. Humphries (1981) argued that rule-breaking by working class young people is an established form of resistance to institutions that attempt to inculcate conformist behaviour, and Willis (1977) interpreted young men’s anti-school attitudes as a political reaction against education which they see as irrelevant. Such oppositional behaviour does not necessarily operate in young people’s own interests; Willis’s ‘lads’ excluded themselves from school knowledge which may have given them more options in their lives. It is probable that the most disadvantaged young people are most likely to be excluded from the NCS: five percent of young people were dismissed from the Challenge Trust trial schemes because of misbehaviour (Natasha, 2010).

It is unclear how much autonomy the workers will have over decisions like exclusions; I have never permanently excluded a young person from a group, but would my libertarian attitude be accepted if I worked on an NCS scheme? The worker’s role appears to be limited to supervising and leading rather than being based on notions of informal education and empowerment. After running team building activities all day, the worker will organise group discussions every evening around ‘what team members have learned about themselves, teamwork and leadership [and] important concepts such as adulthood, community and Britishness’ (Conservative Party, 2010a:10). Such issues are complex and workers may have little chance for preparation given their long working hours and short term contracts. Although many youth workers are skilled facilitators and would do their best to encourage critical reflection, this is of limited value when ‘what one is “critically reflecting” about is often vacuous, ahistorical, one-sided, and ideologically driven’ (Apple, 2004:6). The

community action part of the project which is consistent with youth and community workers' experience is instead to be delegated to business mentors and 'a "Dragon's Den" style panel of local business and community leaders' (Conservative Party, 2010a:10). It seems likely that young people's ideas for community projects will be highly regulated.

The level of contestation by workers may be limited by their temporary contracts, partial involvement in the scheme, and perhaps their lack of knowledge and confidence. Although the Conservative Party envisaged the schemes being run by someone with 'significant experience of youth and community work in a residential setting' (2010a:9), it is unlikely that experienced workers will be willing to undertake such demanding work on piecemeal contracts for the very low pay offered.<sup>5</sup> Youth work has been increasingly micro-managed in recent years (Davies and Merton, 2009), but the level of detailed instruction on content and method in the NCS policy is unprecedented. The NCS removes significant autonomy from youth workers, and yet the Conservative Party claims it as 'a clear demonstration of our belief in social responsibility, not state control' (2010a:3). It remains to be seen how young people and workers will respond. Organised opposition may emerge, although its likelihood might be lessened by a focus on the pressing matter of cuts and by the concerns of pragmatists who wish not to offend the new administration. Either way, everyday contestation will have a significant role because policies when put into practice are inevitably 'inflected, mediated, resisted and misunderstood, or in some cases simply prove unworkable'. (Ball, 2008a:7)

## Conclusion

At the time of writing the National Citizen Service has inspired no demonstrations; there has been limited debate and a lack of analysis, but as a policy it can nevertheless be understood as a process of contestation and struggle. Firstly, because it is part of a policy settlement which is itself rich in struggle and contestation. Secondly, because its production involved limited contestation by some, while consciously excluding others from the debate. Thirdly, because its documents represent contested discourses of youth and youth work and use language in an attempt to limit contestation and struggle. And fourthly, because the future enactment of this policy will contain possibilities for everyday contestation by young people and practitioners.

But does a focus on contestation and struggle present the whole picture, or is it a romanticised or simplified view? Although I have focused on elements of disagreement, it could be argued that silence has been a more dominant response in this case. Silence does not necessarily imply active support for the policy; people may understandably be focusing their attention on the more immediate threat of cuts, especially as elements of the content, production and language of this policy discourage or restrict opposition. By focusing only on struggle we might under-estimate

the ways in which policy can discipline and constrain educators and young people. We might also overlook the role played by other factors including pragmatism, vanity, interpersonal relations, chaos, consultation, negotiation and financial constraints; the real-world messiness of policy in practice (Lather, 2008). Policy analysis should recognise these complexities and the ways in which policy can act to reduce the possibilities for struggle and contestation, whether through laws that make struggle illegal, insecure employment practices that make contestation more risky, or discourse that serves to normalise ‘the way things are’ and demonise those who challenge it.

And yet, policy is intimately linked to struggle and contestation. Policy can both inspire and restrict political opposition, while popular struggle and grassroots contestation can either challenge or contribute to the hegemonic nature of policy. Successive legislation has reduced the options for public struggle, notably since Thatcher’s defeat of the miners’ strikes in the 1980s which diminished the power of organised workplace resistance, and the 1994 Criminal Justice Act which curtailed the right to protest in the wake of effective environmental, social and animal rights activism (Crown copyright, 1994). Legislation is frequently backed by the media portrayal of demonstrators as ‘violent’ even when the majority of violence is perpetrated by the police. Possibilities for workplace contestation are also likely to be curtailed as youth services are closed down or commissioned out to private groups and workers are employed on insecure contracts. The complex and disciplinary nature of policy should not be overlooked, and apparent policy silences should be explored for what they conceal and reveal. But in such a context it is particularly important to retain optimism in the possibilities for change, as tens of thousands of education activists have shown in recent months. For critical educators and young people the most hopeful understanding of policy will continue to focus on opportunities for contestation and struggle.

*The author would like to thank Sharon Gewirtz, Meg Maguire and colleagues from ‘In Defence of Youth Work’ for inspiring this article.*

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## Notes

- 1 Select committee 'Inquiry into services for young people' hearing on 26th January 2011, where evidence was given by Liam Preston (British Youth Council), Charlotte Hill (UK Youth), Susanne Rauprich (National Council for Voluntary Youth Services) and Fiona Blacke (National Youth Agency).
- 2 In the UK parliamentary system, Green Papers are policy consultation documents put forward by the Government of the day; the Conservatives were not in power at the time but presumably hoped to give the impression of a 'Government in waiting'.
- 3 Not in Education, Employment or Training.

- 4 Mandela in Conservative Party (2007:19); Alinsky and Obama in Conservative Party (2010b:2); Gandhi in Conservative Party (2010:2); Wilkinson and Pickett in Cameron (2009).
- 5 A senior mentor working for the lead provider will be paid £1200-£1400 for two weeks residential work responsible for twelve young people, plus one week full-time non-residential work, four extra days over four weekends, and a weekend of training (Challenge Trust, 2010). Assuming each week is five days long this comes to a maximum of £66 per day including overnight stays. A team mentor will be paid £1000 for four weeks full-time work of which two weeks are residential, plus four weekends and three days training, coming to £32 per day.



# Liberation or Containment: Paradoxes in youth work as a catalyst for powerful learning

Annette Coburn

## Abstract

*Youth work discourse often promotes engagement and an empowering educational purpose where voluntary participation is considered an authentic signpost of effective practice (Davies, 2005; Jeffs and Smith, 1999). Yet, Ord (2009) has noted that voluntary participation brings no guarantee of empowered engagement and Taylor (2008) has called for youth workers and young people to work together to challenge and change those discourses that alienate young people from political participation. This article draws on the findings of a study on young people's experiences of equality in youth work to consider how an empowering manifesto might be realised. In this setting, youth work enabled young people to take decisions that challenged ingrained inequality and power imbalance. However, while they perceived youth work as positive, they were also routinely subject to surveillance and control. The tensions this created were often contrary to empowering practices. This led me to examine how paradoxes in youth work might be useful in constructing a powerful learning environment to enable young people and youth workers to engage in critical and empowering practice.*

**Key words:** Youth work, critical pedagogy, powerful learning.

WHEN I STARTED writing, LibCon was a shorthand title for this article – how times have changed! Now the LibCon Government's 'big society' smoke screen promises a series of scathing cuts and an uncertain future for youth work across the UK. This is all the more worrying because youth work and certainty were never closely associated in the first place. For example, the purpose of youth work as a social and emancipatory pedagogy appears in stark contrast to outcome-driven targets or other immeasurable 'certainties'.

When Bernard Davies wrote '*A Youth Work Manifesto*' it coincided with growing interest in youth work practices that facilitated young people's engagement in a range of social and educational processes to 'finally move it from the recreational margins of public provision' (Davies, 2005:3). However, Davies qualified this optimism by suggesting the terms of engagement were, 'increasingly being set by non-youth work agencies ... [and policy makers] ... who failed to understand its potential in work with young people' (Davies, 2005:5). Such concern was consistent with an erosion of fundamental youth work values and principles, in favour of formally accredited learning (Smith, 2002), and the involvement of 'non-youth work' agencies in defining and funding

the nature and purpose of youth work (Harland and Morgan, 2006). This article responds to these uncertain times by offering insights from a study on young people's experiences of equality in one youth work setting. It considers the nature and purpose of youth work as critical pedagogy and what this might mean for practice where, 'it is the ability to enable young people to engage which is important' (Ord, 2009:45).

## The nature and purpose of youth work as informal critical education

The position taken here is that youth work is grounded in education that is informal, conversational and critical (Spence et al, 2006; Batsleer, 2008). It draws on the views of Paulo Freire (1972) who developed a view of pedagogy that aimed to enable people to become more critically conscious of the world so that they could consider what action they needed to take to resist their oppressors. Freire was troubled by what he called a 'banking' concept of education where information and knowledge was deposited in students through schooling and where the teacher was positioned as having expert knowledge and wisdom. A banking concept of education suggested that learners could 'withdraw' their information and knowledge 'deposits', when required or 'bank' ideas until needed.

Paulo argued that the banking concept is flawed in positioning the teacher as all knowing and powerful and suggesting that they alone have the answers to every problem and are receptacles or creators of all knowledge. Banking education relies on learner recall and interpretation to make sense of the concepts that have been banked, long after deposits are made. Yet, recall is affected by the passage of time and influenced by recent experience so, for example, poor recall can further distort and inform, or mis-inform interpretation. Banking conceptualisations of education help to maintain the status quo by teaching people about the dominant ideas in society, thus, perpetuating and ingraining them; in doing so they are seldom permissive or encouraging of any attempt to question their validity or veracity. This succeeds in fostering a sense of there being a 'right way' of doing things, based on the dominant values and perspectives of the state.

As an alternative to the banking approach, Freire (1972) argued for conceptualisations of education as critical dialogue, where over time and through ongoing conversations, people work together to examine problems and create their own meaning and knowledge. Banking education would encourage youth workers to focus on teaching young people about particular behaviour or knowledge that was considered useful by society. Conversational (dialogical) education would open new lines of enquiry and free up those involved in conversation from the manipulations of powerful others (Batsleer, 2008; Bessant, 2007).

In youth work terms, banking education is congruent with a formal curriculum and delineated outcomes related to the transfer of imbued knowledge. In contrast, informal conversational education centres on the young person as learner and facilitates the exploration of possibilities for transformation of their lives (Freire, 1972; Giroux, 2005; Batsleer, 2008). Informal education has been promoted as an approach which ‘takes us into the conscious world’, and that youth work is informal education insofar as it relies on the ‘twists and turns of conversation’ (Jefferis and Smith 2005:17,23) rather than following a prescribed, formal curriculum.

‘Critical pedagogy’ as developed by Freire, offers an alternative to formalised, banking education (Freire, 1972; 1993 Giroux, 2005; Kincheloe, 2008) relevant to those who are not part of formalised schooling or, for whom formal approaches are ineffective. The starting point for critical pedagogy is the learner and not the teacher or the state. The aim of critical pedagogy is to raise consciousness to a level that empowers people to build ideas and to take responsibility for their actions. Taking a critical approach to pedagogy, positions the teacher as learner and the learner as teacher, and proposes that by becoming more critically aware, people can increase their repertoire of knowledge and understanding and so take action for change at individual and social levels. Thus, a critical pedagogical approach to youth work engages young people by encouraging them to become inquisitive, to question why things are the way they are, and to pose problems through which they can learn, together and in collaboration with workers, how to resolve those problems. Youth work as critical pedagogy operates informally and uses dynamic and organic methods that are difficult to examine or measure using standard mechanisms for assessing delivery of predetermined outcomes. Therefore, explicit in this kind of youth work is the need to consider alternative forms of evaluation that celebrate and improve sustained critically thoughtful practices.

## The function of self-evaluation in maintaining the status quo

To improve and celebrate practice, youth workers and young people work together to evaluate and share experiences. Current inspection frameworks increasingly rely on self-evaluation, which may not be as useful as they appear. Sarah Smart has argued that a steady increase in evaluation that is based on self-assessment, encourages, ‘youth workers to constantly observe their own practice, while taking on the priorities of those in power’ (Smart, 2007:78). Michel Foucault’s ideas about knowledge and power have suggested that the concept of ‘examination’ provides a means through which people are, ‘coerced to conform’ in what has been termed as hierarchised surveillance (Foucault, 1991). Surveillance, by those in more powerful authority positions, implies that passing exams is about providing answers that are aligned to and in accordance with the dominant discourse. Taken in its broadest sense, examination could mean traditional school or university end of term tests, but it may also include examination of practice, for example, in performance measurement and in the plethora of evaluation and inspection frameworks.

Smart proposed a congruence between the use of self-assessment and Foucault's position on the examination, as processes that compel individuals to value other people's priorities more highly, thus encouraging conformity (Smart, 2007:77-78). So long as youth work remains driven by agencies and policies that are neither imbued with nor resonate with its critical and empowering purpose, this will create tensions between theory, policy and practice. According to Stuart Waiton (2001) these policies have been aligned to discourses of fear and control, under the banner of safety and regulation. Youth workers are expected to self-assess and evaluate performance, against criteria that are often incongruent with youth work values, purpose and potential. Developed from a position of power that values conformity over resistance, such evaluation frameworks help to maintain, rather than to challenge, the status quo. These frameworks serve to stifle innovation and growth rather than encourage it.

We have seen how banking education fosters compliance with dominant ideas, knowledge and values, and perpetuates teaching from a position of hierarchical power. This could best be envisaged as pyramidal in structure, feeding downward from an apex of authority, position and unfettered influence that may lead to unhealthy and pressurised practice. This works against Davies' (2005) aims of liberation and transformation by suggesting the dominant discourse as the only one and by enabling young people to quickly learn, just as the self-assessing youth worker does, to conform to those in power and to perpetuate their ideas. By conforming to dominant discourse, young people are more likely to 'fit in' and less likely to resist oppression. It follows that where the dominant discourse criminalises and categorises young people as deviant (Barber, 2007; Morgan and O'Hare, 2001) increased use of self-assessment and surveillance have shifted youth work towards a more formalised and controlling practice.

This article builds on young people's experiences of one youth work setting, to suggest how it both liberates and contains them. Many of the findings will not surprise youth workers. However, by researching young people's perspectives the study provides empirical evidence of their views on youth work and on their formation of relationships with youth workers and with each other. The findings suggest that, within this case study, young people were both liberated and contained and this paradox underpinned young people's perceptions and interpretations of their experiences of equality within the setting.

## A Note on the Research Design

The study examined young people's perspectives and experiences of equality within one youth work setting and explored how these contributed to learning and to understanding their views. Taking an ethnographic case study approach meant that ideas were developed through interpretation of what the young people said and my observations within the setting. Ethnography has been suggested as

an inherently social process that seeks to discover meaning by describing or interpreting culture and contributing to democratic purpose and social change (Geertz, 1973; Conteh et al, 2005). The specific setting was suggested as a single case that included dimensions of individual experience.

In undertaking this study, I met fifty-six young people for initial briefing and of those, twenty-four attended follow-up meetings and seventeen were selected on the basis of pre-set criteria. The research positioned young people as ‘expert witnesses’ in relation to their own lives (Davie et al, 1996). Their responses to direct questions on their experiences of equality were triangulated with data from observations and examination of policy and practice documents, to help strengthen the trustworthiness of the findings (Conteh et al, 2005).

Thematic analysis, as defined by Boyatzis (1998), was used to develop coding categories that facilitated identification of emerging themes. This meant that, rather than identifying pre-set themes or providing a checklist of topics to be ‘looked for’, information was gathered and later coded and grouped together into categories. Initially 29 categories were reduced to 7 themes as follows:

*Structural Influences* – those influences identified by young people such as school, college and the family;

*Well-being* – young people’s identified feelings, respect, trust and emotional states such as anger or happiness;

*Being and Becoming* – references to time and place as an indication of immediate or future action;

*Youth Culture* – reference to style, musical taste, young teams/gangs and territoriality;

*Equality* – young people’s mention of race, age, being treated fairly, and observations of them in gendered and different power relations within the setting;

*Youth Work* – observations of interaction with youth workers or with others in the youth work setting;

*Thinking and Theorising* – evidence of young people stopping to think, making thoughtful suggestions or admitting uncertainty about what they thought.

In line with the nature of a small scale study, the findings are descriptive of the experiences and perceptions of young people in the single case setting. Ongoing detailed discussions, observations and data collection over a three year period helped increase congruence and authenticate findings (Conteh, et al, 2005).

## Locating the findings within youth work

Despite initial interest in a breadth of equality topics, such as race or gender, the focus of the

specific case was more closely aligned to experiences within the generic youth work setting. While there is no single model for youth work, a variety of typical ideas have been suggested in relation to its development and delivery (see for example Batsleer, 2008; Davies, 2005; Jeffs and Smith, 1999; McCulloch, 2007; Ord, 2004; Spence et al, 2006). This article makes particular reference to the work of Davies (2005) and more recent discussions on the voluntary participation principle (Ord, 2009; Coburn, 2010). In doing so, it takes the position that youth work is modelled on a set of common values and ethical principles that affirm its purpose as social, democratic education where engagement is negotiated and participation is voluntary but where choices on whether to attend may not always be the young person's decision. Discussion of findings is developed in three sections.

First, participants reported their experiences of positive relationships with youth workers and with each other. Analysis of young people's perspectives and observation of their interactions, suggested the case study location to be a place where they formed relationships with caring adults and where they freely associated with each other, crossing boundaries of age, ability and style.

Second, these practices supported participation as part of an empowering and liberating youth work. Empowerment was evidenced within the setting, in terms of young people having a degree of freedom to choose what they engaged in and to participate in decision-making and policy development. Yet routine surveillance and a lack of autonomy often contradicted these positive practices.

Finally, these contradictions led me to conclude that the paradoxical nature of youth work might provide the basis of discussion as to how the problems posed by paradox, may strengthen the possibilities for critical learning in youth work.

## The formation of positive relationships

In a study of how youth workers defined the work they do, participants were strongly supportive of process-based relationships, rather than product-orientated outcomes where, 'the process of youth work was generally seen to be contingent on the quality of relationship between a young person and a youth worker' (Harland and Morgan, 2006:10). The importance of this relationship was also central to this study. For example, one young person, who lived with a long term and debilitating illness, perceived youth workers as important in encouraging her to volunteer:

*You have a good laugh with them and that ... If I didn't come up here I don't think I would have a good life at all ... the workers encouraged me to become a volunteer ... if I didn't volunteer I wouldn't have anything ... before I ever came up here, I didn't have anything ... in my life or that ... so I'd say ... the staff have helped me a lot. Samantha, aged 18*

In this extract Samantha suggests her relationship with youth workers as central to her experiences of life. The importance of such relationship has been understood as integral to youth work practice (Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Robertson, 2005; Young, 1999) and defined as a cornerstone of its emancipatory and democratic purpose (Taylor, 2010). One young person highlighted the importance of treating young people with respect:

*[The workers here] ... they're good to have a laugh with, but they also treat you like an adult ... like in school, you get a lot of teachers, who just don't treat you like an adult, they treat you like a child ... being treated like that ... means it's easier to get your point across and it's not frustrating ... they treat you, like ... with more respect. Ryan, aged 17*

This suggests youth work settings to be sites wherein different kinds of relationships between adults and young people can flourish (Barber, 2007; Robertson, 2001).

Within a society where the young people to adult relationships have become fragile and disrupted (Williams, 2009; Taylor, 2008), the facilitation of intergenerational connection, as exemplified in youth work practised as critical pedagogy, could potentially unite them in common democratic purpose. It was interesting to note in the case study that the nature of these relationships changed over time, as each of the young people became more involved in the setting:

*I get on much better with ... [worker] ... now. When I first came here she was always telling me what to do and I was always in bother with all the staff ... but then I got into the youth exchange and things like that ... and like, [worker] got to know me better... I changed a bit ... like not mucking about as much ... so we get on better she asks me things now...my opinion and stuff ... it's much better now than when I first came up ... I've quietened down and we get on better. Paula, aged 16*

This indicates the relationship between youth workers and young people to be ongoing, educational and developmental and a means of helping to increase feelings of value and worth. By volunteering to help others, Samantha felt valued and this made a positive contribution to her life and in the lives of others; when Ryan felt respected, it was easier to get his point across; and Paula's involvement in the youth exchange had increased her capacity to sustain positive relationships.

The case study observations confirmed the importance of building positive relationships in youth work. Young people were routinely challenged to think about problems and discuss the consequences of their actions, by workers who took time to explain the why and how of problems, rather than simply by issuing statements claiming knowledge or giving instruction. Yet there were tensions in the early stages of this developing relationship when it appeared to the young people that workers were authoritarian and they got into trouble because of their behaviour. To overcome this

perception, I observed workers using appropriate interpersonal skills, positive language, problem posing and supportive dialogue that reinforced the importance of building relationships that, 'need to be nurtured and can take a long time to develop' (Robertson, 2005:54).

In addition to their relationships with youth workers, young people's social, emotional and cultural identities were also influenced through a range of friendship associations. In the café area I observed young people having a laugh and interacting with each other in a relaxed and informal social space. Participants adopted a range of contemporary styles that presented in dress code, hairstyle, use of make-up and other adornments, to signify membership of one cultural grouping or another. They spoke of alliances to those groups:

*Em ... really it depends on...eh ... what choices in life you make ... like you can become a grunger or a ned or just somewhere totally neutral in the middle ... or there's people who are what would be known as trendies, sort of wearing fashion clothes and that ...* Jack, aged 16

Everyone involved in this study suggested that youth work enabled people from different groupings and lifestyles to mix more freely and openly than they would in other settings:

*Outside of here ... em ... people call you names and it can escalate into a situation where you feel more anxious ... whereas in here that doesn't happen ... the youth workers are always there ... there's always a sense of authority, almost ... not anything that they [the workers] abuse or anything ... just the sense that if anything goes wrong, they will always help ... not to, like, pick sides but to break things up ... you never need to feel anxious because the workers are there to talk to if you have a problem.* Alan, aged 15

Alan's comments were consistent with Smith's characteristics for youth work that identified the need for commitment to association and positive relationships with others, synthesis of friendliness, informal approach, integrity and a concern for well-being (Smith, 2002). Yet, Alan also noted how a sense of authority helped him to feel safe. This was consistent with the role of youth workers in controlling the creation of a safe learning environment (Jeffs and Banks, 2010). In this way, Alan and others, articulated a view of youth work where risk-taking and safety-making go hand in hand and because of this, where routine encounters and practices require, 'critical ethical reflection, analysis and dialogue' (Banks, 2010:20). The creation of a safe youth work space meant that in this setting young people crossed boundaries of ability, age and cultural style to become volunteers, engage in conversations with adults and mixed with people that routinely they would not otherwise have connected with. Had the workers not taken an initially clear stance in not tolerating abuse on grounds of ability, style or other forms of difference, these boundary crossing opportunities might not have been realised. Taking such a stance was not, in itself, enough. By simply instructing young people to change their behaviours, their response would be learned but not understood. More



usefully, I observed youth workers engaging in critical and problem posing conversations about difference and this engaged young people in learning for understanding than simply learning to meet the demands or seek approval from youth workers.

## Participation and empowerment in the youth work setting

The concept of participation has been attributed as having a ‘mushrooming effect’ whereby, once engaged, young people’s involvement increases and so participation becomes a catalyst for future action (Hackett, 2004.). Young people’s participation has been extended across many areas of public policy but capacity for this to enhance democracy and youth empowerment are limited within the present social systems and structures (Podd, 2010). A progressive mushrooming effect of participation was demonstrated in this study through the transformation of young people from service users, to volunteer service providers:

*I come up here because I enjoy it...I’ve started volunteering and so I’m doing a Dynamic Youth Award ... it’s something I never thought I’d do, but I just clicked with it, and I enjoy it.*  
Ryan, aged 17

Ryan’s experience was consistent with Adam Dinham (2007) whose research findings indicate a direct relationship between participation and social well-being. Ryan’s commentary on volunteering confirmed,

*When I was younger, I was a bit of a bam ... I never thought I’d do anything like that ... I never thought I’d enjoy it...when I first came up, I thought it would be one of these youth places, where people come and play games, do things and that would be it ... I never thought you could get involved in so many ways ... I met a lot of people, even the youth workers ... I get on well with the workers ... its changed me ... I’ve stopped being a bam and I’ve straightened out.* Ryan, aged 17

The youth work setting had exceeded Ryan’s expectations as a place where young people participated in activities, to become integral to his personal development and well-being. Becoming a volunteer in the games group and youth council appeared to have contributed to Ryan’s transformation and suggested volunteering as a means of increasing self-efficacy; ‘The fundamental empowering transformation ... is in the transition from the sense of self as helpless victim to acceptance of self as an assertive and efficacious citizen’ (Kieffer,1984:33).

Combining evidence from interviews, observations and e-diaries – it appears that volunteering within this setting contributed to the aspirations of ‘empowering transformation’ (Kieffer,

1984:33). Volunteering had, for some of this cohort, provided an opportunity for them to realise their potential in taking control of key elements of their lives such as building their confidence through helping others, or learning about budgeting and decision-making through planning an international youth exchange. The young people were also empowered in their choices to opt in or out of activities or projects freely. While this meant that participation could be argued as voluntary, and not connected to referral by another agency, young people's experiences of power changed over time as their relationships with workers developed and so the degrees of choice and freedom to engage were more complex and fluid than simply their decision to attend (Ord, 2009). There was also the question of whether changes were due to young people learning to conform to others' expectations about their behaviour and the extent to which the young people or workers were critically conscious of this possibility.

On a superficial level, workers maintained support that facilitated routine leisure time activity, by providing equipment for sports, access to computers or a friendly face around the café. An alternative level of consciousness was evidenced in, for example, participation in the planning of the international youth exchange. This included practical aspects but also enabled the young people to take control of fundraising to make the exchange affordable for all, thereby changing their roles and relationships with each other and with workers. For example, over many months of planning and preparation, young people and workers appeared to become more trusting of each other.. The young people were aware that their participation in the youth exchange had enabled them to think more deeply about equality issues. It opened them to other options and consideration of difference. However, it was not clear from the findings whether the youth exchange was deliberately introduced and understood by all involved as an exercise in consciousness-raising. The young people suggested this raised awareness was a by-product of their participation but it had not featured overtly in preparatory discussions, which were focused on programming, fundraising and maintenance of appropriate behaviour.

Initial observations noted workers adopting, what was described as, authoritarian approaches to leadership (Lewin et al, 1939). This included controlling meetings, preparing agendas and instructing young people. Over time, according to the young people, the development of trust and increased confidence, in both the workers and themselves, brought a more 'laid back' approach to leadership. This facilitated action to support, encourage, guide and motivate exchange participants, emphasising the importance of trusting relationships in youth work (de St. Croix, 2010). Increased trust was noted by all of the young people as one aspect of the changes over time in their relationships with youth workers. This was regarded in a very positive light. Some suggested it was part of their being accepted as an adult rather than treated as a child.

The language used by young people to describe these feelings was interesting. The word 'acceptance' was associated with becoming adult, while 'treatment' was associated with being a

child. This exemplified how language was used to perpetuate age-based differentiation of young people and illustrated how adult power was maintained within the setting. For example, the young people sought and valued acceptance by the youth workers and in many cases suggested that they deserved to be treated differently, because they had progressed beyond what was perceived by them and the workers, as ‘child-like’ behaviour.

*When I first came up here I was always getting into trouble, cause I was running around all the time and not listening to the youth workers at all ... then.. well about three or four months ago, something just clicked ... I could see what the youth workers were talking about ... they weren't just giving me trouble for no reason ... it was as though I'd grown up so when I stopped acting like a child, they stopped treating me like one. Mags, aged 17*

According to Mags, participation in youth work helped her to gain a range of social and cultural skills that meant ‘something clicked’ to inform her understanding of how her behaviour needed to change. It could also be argued that this ‘understanding’ was framed within a fundamentally ageist discourse that suggested particular behaviour as child-like and could be perpetuated through ‘co-operation or resistance of youth workers and young people ... in youth work ... [that is] ... characterised by containment, control and surveillance’ (de St Croix, 2010:146-147). So while Mags saw this change in a positive light, the need for behaviour change was aligned with dominant discourses on what it meant to be an adult or a child. Change was also evident in participants’ expectations within the setting. These changed from being about making friends and having a laugh to engaging in the running of this facility:

*I used to come up and muck around ... but then I got more involved ... I help run the café ... we check stock and tell the workers what to order ... some people think its cheap labour but I think its about helping others ... because I work in the café for nothing, other young people who haven't got much money, can afford to buy things ... if I didn't do that it would be too expensive for them ... so its about me giving something back ... and I know that because I'm more involved, I'm getting older, I have different conversations with the workers ... they see that I am growing up ... being more responsible ... so I'm accepted as a kind of youth worker. Alex, aged 17*

In this extract, Alex offers a clear rationale for volunteering and taking additional responsibility that implies a more conscious social and democratic purpose. Participation in more challenging activity or becoming involved in participation structures was also evident in young people’s experiences of the youth council. This involved them in consultations that helped shape policy and service provision, for example in revision of the local youth strategy. They were included, by giving their opinion during consultation workshops, and two study participants became actively involved in developing the strategy for the whole Local Authority area. Formed around core ideas

of social purpose in education (Freire, 1972), the youth council could be regarded as liberating young people insofar as it aimed to increase their democratic participation (Tett, 2006). This was consistent with ideas of citizenship and democracy that in Scottish youth work policy can be traced back to the early 1980s (Fyfe, 2010). However, the extent to which consultation may be regarded as empowering participation is contested because it often relies on individual staff interest to take forward challenging activity (Podd, 2010). This seems particularly cogent in a country where, 'the trickle of stories about youth work is in inverse proportion to the flood of stories about youth' (Batsleer, 2010:154).

Unsurprisingly, within this youth work setting there were paradoxes in that, despite some progress, power was located with youth workers. This was exemplified when a youth council meeting was cancelled due to worker absence. The young people, who were experienced youth councillors, wanted the meeting to go ahead but they were told it could not because there was nobody available to provide adult support. In this instance, despite a supportive intention, the locus of power and decision taking was retained by adult workers. Regardless of young people complaining, they didn't challenge this decision or feel empowered to convene the meeting. This seemingly reinforces the suggestion of conformity by young people who were reliant on and contained by, controlling youth work practice.

Thus, while youth workers were often observed building positive relationships with young people that were considered as liberating by those young people, the limitations on their use of power was problematic. While there were examples of power sharing in the youth exchange and youth council, age based inequality was most obviously manifest in the routine practice of surveillance.

## The Routine Practice of Surveillance

Observations in the case study noted the use of a 'staff rota' that meant workers moved from one part of the building to another at pre-arranged times. This meant that young people were rarely left alone in an area unsupervised. This included a large games hall area where workers watched young people as they played football. This practice was also noted within the café and the internet area of the facility, where one young person suggested that a lack of trust was the reason for this. An alternative explanation suggested health and safety reasons for this routine. Neither explanation was considered as entirely appropriate. Workers spent many hours, months and years, building positive relationships with young people, facilitating their access to costly resources or enabling them to take important decisions. Yet, the lack of trust inherent in surveillance practices seemed incongruent with those other practices, particularly in those locations where the level of risk was not assessed as high. Action to prevent harm would seem more consistent with empowering youth work and indeed the advice of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE, 2008).

The practice of routine surveillance was evident throughout the study and across the case study setting. These paradoxes in youth work are not new but finding that young people were aware of them when asked to think about equality was interesting in opening up the possibility of using them to scaffold learning.

## So how might these paradoxes impact on empowering youth work?

The impact of the recession and anticipated cuts in service industries compounds concern about the nature, purpose and future of youth work. The survival of social purpose, democratic youth work as a means of enhancing young people's capacity for dissent (Tett, 2006) may arguably depend on youth work conversations and the voices of those practitioners, who articulate, research and share practices (Spence, 2006). It has become increasingly clear to me that we need to share practices and theorise youth work outside of prevailing discourses. I believe we need to build a kind of youth work capital that has currency across a range of disciplinary areas. This position could be strengthened by considering youth work as a border crossing pedagogy (Coburn, 2010), that embraces those informal educational processes that have defined and shaped practice over many years. This border crossing pedagogy takes a forward facing approach to youth work in settings where key elements of those processes, such as the voluntary principle, are compromised. In this sense, youth work is grounded, as it was in this study, in the long-term evolutionary nature of relationships and in the development of young people and youth workers' capacity to challenge power discourses that seek to control and contain them.

The case study findings suggest that participation in youth work helped change young people's perceptions of each other and fostered inclusion and integration among a diverse range of people,

*Coming up here has changed my thinking ... like when I first came up I thought...people with disabilities and that ... you come up here and see that they are treated the same as everyone else ... everyone kind of mucks in and gets on well with each other ... coming up here has kind of helped me to understand a bit ... you know, that even although people have disabilities and are like, different ... well, everyone's different, but everyone's treated the same.*

Alison, aged 16

What Alison described as, 'everyone mucking in', typified the feelings of those who associated with people who would not have been their friends, outside of the youth work setting. This included responding to young people from different areas or cultural style-types:

*Like I don't know, in a youth centre kind of setting like this, everyone mixes and stuff ... you*

*take part in activities and stuff that the centre puts on and like you all play football together and go on trips together and stuff, you just kinda get the chance to mix with other people. Whereas if you were outside, you might think, well I don't want to hang about with them or whatever, because of the way they're dressed or that ...* Carol, aged 19

However, the findings also suggested that, within this setting, youth work had not gone far enough in challenging age-based discrimination. This was evident in the paradox of adult control versus youth empowerment.

In light of contemporary debates about young people that, 'focus on their deficiencies and lack of responsibility rather than their marginality or the impact of structural inequalities on their lives' (Tett, 2006:49), changes in funding and policy directions have been suggested as the cause of an, 'ideological shift' in youth work (Harland et al, 2005:58). This shift has determined that youth work should combat exclusion by providing young people with accredited qualifications (Merton et al, 2004). It has been argued that within this changing youth work infrastructure social care staff, including youth workers, appear constrained by a 'poverty of vision' and where contradictions abound in requirements to 'mimic business values, when they went into the profession with an emotional vocation' (Batmanghelidjh, 2006:23).

Taken together, these arguments present a variety of reasons for the contradictions within youth work, such as, structural under-funding and misappropriation of youth work for other purposes. This means that ensuring youth work meets its full potential is both a complex and lengthy process. It suggests the need for a dissenting vocation (Martin, 2001) through which prevailing discourses on young people and newly commandeered purposes of youth work may be challenged and extended as new discourses and purposes emerge.

The development of trusting relationships between young people and youth workers offers a way of working through the problems created by paradoxes to encourage informal learning. The creation of powerful learning environments (De Corte et al, 2003; Konings et al, 2005) may be enhanced by building on the trusted associations between adults and young people in youth work. Powerful learning is created by involving learners in grappling with real problems that are challenging and complex and by involving learners in the process of creating knowledge. This was evidenced in practices where workers and young people were engaged as teachers and learners with and of each other (Freire, 1972). It is potentially liberating for young people and youth workers in offering the possibility of empowering engagement on a range of both individual and collective levels. Youth work provides spaces for young people to learn within an informal social environment that involves not only young people working and learning together but incorporates intergenerational learning amongst young people and youth workers.

This study noted that the youth work setting enabled boundaries of style grouping, age and ability to be crossed and also identified paradoxes within the setting. Viewing youth work as a critical border crossing pedagogy affords capacity to help meet the challenges of the current recession and previous unfulfilled policy promises by crossing boundaries to create new learning spaces where young people and youth workers become engaged in teaching and learning together.

Youth work as critical pedagogy may also enable engagement in settings where the voluntary principle is compromised (Ord, 2009; Coburn, 2010). For example, by using the setting as the basis of problem posing dialogue about the nature of freedom and choice to consider what influences our decisions to engage or not. Similarly, the paradoxes in this study may be viewed as problematic because they illustrate both the liberation and the containment of young people. Yet, they create possibilities for powerful learning about power and difference that is real, challenging and complex, and where opportunities to re-define pedagogical relationships between youth workers and young people enhances the learning environment.

## Conclusion

Davies' reassertion of its value base and purpose, positions youth work as a catalyst for liberation, by putting young people first and tipping the balance of power more firmly in their favour (Davies, 2005). The findings of this study suggest that young people and youth workers may examine and challenge the paradoxes within youth work and use these to achieve powerful learning.

The findings suggest that youth work provide spaces where young people's learning is enhanced through development of new, different and layered relationships with peers and with the youth workers they encounter. Consequently, this article proposes youth work as a powerful learning environment (De Corte et al, 2003) where young people and youth workers learn together and teach each other. These environments offer and create alternative discourses that are affirming and positive, rather than being primarily about containment and surveillance. In this way, youth work may be manifest in educational collaborations that use the problems created by paradox as a catalyst for a liberating and hopeful pedagogy that is concerned with critical conversation and empowering engagement.

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# An Opportunity Lost? Exploring the benefits of the Child Trust Fund on youth transitions to adulthood

Lee Gregory

## Abstract

*With the decision to abolish the Child Trust Fund announced by the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition in May 2010, this paper explores what impact the abandonment of a unique policy innovation will have in relation to youth transitions: in so doing it outlines the policy context and the central idea of the 'asset-effect'. Some thought is then given to the criticisms of the Child Trust Fund before the policy, and its asset-effect is considered with regards to its relationship to, and potential benefit for, youth transitions and improving social mobility. In conclusion the paper argues that despite the decision to scrap the policy, there is scope to learn from those who do retain their Child Trust Fund.*

**Key words:** Adult Transitions, Poverty, Asset-based Welfare

**I**N 2001 THE Labour Government announced the Child Trust Fund (CTF) policy. This was to be a savings account for children born from September 2002 to foster the savings habit and encourage families, and later the young people themselves, to build their own assets. On the 24th May 2010 the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government announced that the CTF would be phased out and abolished in January 2011 (guardian.co.uk, 24th May 2010), and it is now a part of the *Savings Accounts and Health in Pregnancy Grant Bill*, awaiting its second reading in the House of Lords at the time of writing. This paper will outline the policy context of the CTF and the argument for an asset-effect: that by holding an asset an individual develops positive psychological, social and financial benefits. Opposition to the policy is then considered before an account is given which claims that by abandoning the policy the government have removed a potentially useful tool for helping stabilise difficult youth transitions to adulthood and the creation of a mechanism which can assist social mobility. In conclusion, however, it is argued that it is still possible to learn from the practice of Asset-based Welfare (ABW), but this will rely on the involvement of welfare professionals.

## The Child Trust Fund

The previous Labour government outlined the CTF in 2001 with the first vouchers being sent out from January 2005 to the families with children born from 1 September 2002.

*The Detailed Proposals for the Child Trust Fund* (HM Treasury, 2003) outlines the operation of the policy. All children born in the period of the trust fund's operation received a £250 initial payment at birth to be followed by a £50 supplementary payment at the age of seven, with voucher distribution being linked to claims for child benefit. The value of these payments doubled when the Inland Revenue compares CTF voucher distribution to Child Tax Credit claims, and all families that were claiming and receiving maximum Child Tax Credit would receive extra money: the most disadvantaged received a £500 voucher and £100 top-up. Additionally, building on suggestions by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR) (Maxwell, 2005; Maxwell et al, 2006), the Welsh Assembly Government (2007) introduced top-ups for children in local authority care, a policy option also adopted by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007). Finally the Assembly passed legislation which provided their own additional and universal £50 top-up for all children starting school in Wales, with £100 for the most disadvantaged children.

After receipt of the voucher the parent(s) could open the CTF account for their child, although failure to do so did not prevent the child from having an account, as the Inland Revenue would automatically open the account after 12 months. This procedure also applied to children who went into care before the CTF voucher was issued, and if no-one claimed parental responsibility for the child. A number of account options were available to parents: equities (shares in companies), cash deposit accounts, bonds or an alternative equity investment. Additionally the Welsh Assembly Government campaigned for credit unions to be able to accept CTF vouchers, as they were originally not allowed to do so (Drakeford, 2010a). The success of this campaign opened up a number of potential benefits. Parents and families could also top up accounts out of their own resources: this was tax-free and up to a limit of £1,200 per year. Furthermore the ability of others who are not the parents of the child to pay into the account opened up the possibility of a small amount of cross-generational transfer of financial resources: potentially from grandparents to grandchildren, an issue little commented upon in asset-based welfare theory.

Whilst other asset-based policies have been designed with specific end-uses in mind (such as Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) in the USA (Sherraden, 1991) or the Taipei Family Development Accounts (Cheng, 2004) which have been designed for housing, education or starting a small business), the UK's CTF has no end-use restrictions. Labour did construct a case for the CTF around benefits of holding the account, associated with financial education lessons in the national curriculum. These included further investment in either physical capital (saving or housing), human capital (i.e. in education or training), or both; this open use was, however, heavily criticised. Some research (Parbhakar, 2007) sought to consider families' views with regards to the CTF, showing that parents from poor families preferred the CTF to extra public money on income support and education; perhaps reflecting the view that those with few financial resources would save but for the lack of resources to do so (Sherraden et al, 2010). Other research sought to explore the potential end use of the fund through the use of vignettes (Gregory and Drakeford, 2005),

arguing that whilst some funds would be 'wasted', the majority of funds would be put to the uses outlined by government.

According to Le Grand (Winter 2009/10), drawing on data from the Children's Mutual (a third sector organisation involved in the children's savings market), 4.6 million children have open and active CTF accounts with approximately 70,000 opened each month. A further 75 per cent of accounts are paid into by parents, originally on average £15 per month but rising to £24 per month. Looking specifically at low income families, 30 per cent pay into their child's CTF. However the data gathered on the CTF does show that whilst four-fifths of parents in affluent areas pay into their child's account, the same is true for only two-fifths of parents in the poorest areas (Guardian, January 4th 2010). The data also indicates that in the most deprived communities 69% of families open accounts for themselves with the money, whilst 83% of low income people living in affluent areas open accounts. Added to this, the recent economic recession saw a drop of a third of a billion pounds in the overall total held in CTF accounts (BBC, 2008), although the long-term nature of the accounts may see that money recovered. However, it should be noted that this related only to accounts linked to the stock market, and so not cash savings accounts. Consequently in their conclusion on the launch on the CTF, Benett et al (2008: 13) state:

*The UK has demonstrated the potential of a universal child savings account, funded with a modest government contribution and delivered through the private sector, to change family savings behaviour significantly. Further development around the issues of parental engagement and increasing savings rates among lower income families could help to ensure the CTF enables all children to build an asset to support their transition to adulthood.*

Finally, the CTF has had an impact on global policy debates. In America there has been growing debate about developing a policy similar to the CTF, often linked to specific end-uses (see Aspen Institute and IPPR, 2007; Clancey et al, 2004; Sherraden, 2009; Elliott and Beverly, 2010), as well as discussion of a 'Bambini bond' within the EU (Le Grand, Winter 2009/10). This attention was generated by the CTF for it was considered the first universal account of its type to be developed.

Operating alongside the CTF, the Labour Government intended for young people to increase their awareness of financial issues through their school education. The intention was that from 2007 pupils would learn about issues relating to the CTF, 'such as saving and investing, risk and return, financial decision-making, the role of the financial services industry and how the economy functions' (HM Treasury, 2003: 19). Alongside learning how funds can be used, young people should gain a growing awareness of the fund that will be available to them, thus strengthening their connection to the asset. The asset-effect theory argues that young people would start to develop a realisation that certain choices and opportunities become open to them in their future which would otherwise have been closed off: attention now turns to consider this asset-effect.

## Asset-based welfare

The CTF represents the idea of Asset-based Welfare (ABW), for it is a different approach for social policy within the income maintenance field focused on developing stocks of wealth and its subsequent asset-effect, rather than income supplement.

As an anti-poverty tool ABW offers an important contribution to efforts to tackle poverty because it aims to lift people out of poverty by changing attitudes. This is achieved by encouraging families and individuals to shift their focus away from an 'income only' view to encompass both income and assets. The effectiveness of ABW in anti-poverty policy, for Sherraden (2003), relies on four key principles: inclusiveness, progressivity, coherence and integration, and development, against which the CTF will now be measured. The test of inclusiveness is met, as the CTF was a universal policy for all children born from 1 September 2002. Yet it went beyond this universal element to incorporate a more progressive idea by providing extra help to the least well-off children (thus linking into the New Labour idea of progressive universalism, meaning that the most disadvantaged received more assistance than the more affluent, (see HM Treasury, 2002; Drakeford, 2007; Wilby, 2007). The principle of development rested at the personal level, reflecting in the emphasis of the previous Labour government's rhetoric linking the CTF to financial education, self-management of accounts and freedom over its future use. However the CTF measured poorly against Sherraden's (2003) value of coherence and integration, primarily because it outstripped the progress of other contemporary ABW schemes, such as stakeholder pension accounts, although the potential to integrate the CTF into other asset-based policies did exist.

Yet the focus of ABW theorists, if not the previous Labour Government, has been on the asset-effect: for it is this effect which is key to changing attitudes. Sherraden (1991) outlined this effect early on in his approach to asset-based policies, arguing that life chances are assigned, fixed and integrated at an early age unless something happens to break the pattern. Consequently, young people's perception of having limited life chances generates negative expectations over their future, leading to negative effects on behaviour. Where life chances are perceived to be good, a positive attitude develops, leading young people to avoid future-threatening temptations.

As Sherraden (1991: 155) explains, 'assets are concrete and consequential... Assets matter and people know it, and therefore, when they have assets they pay attention'. Assets can encourage young people to develop positive perspectives by providing them with the capacity to create their own success. Without this capacity, young people in poorer communities grow up in an environment which provides few life chances, leading excluded young people to develop a set of cognitive schema resigned to limited opportunities: assets break this pattern. The presence of an asset develops a meaningful schema which alters how individuals receive and consider life chance information, in a way traditional education and some anti-poverty programmes cannot.

The tangible aspects of this asset-effect fall into three categories: financial, social and psychological. In financial terms, the asset-effect provides individuals with access to a stock of wealth in times of need. Earning income on those assets and gaining access to previously inaccessible financial services are some of the benefits which ABW is said to provide. Social benefits include better individual health, increased personal social influence, educational improvements and the development of stronger political beliefs and civic participation. Finally, psychological benefits incorporate a stronger future orientation and the financial backing to plan for that future. These psychological effects are perhaps the most pivotal to Sherraden's work, although the other elements of the asset-effect also play key roles in the argument.

An alternative view can be developed from a more sociological perspective which would draw greater attention to the social benefits of holding an asset. For example as Glennerster (2006: 27) explains:

*while an 'adequate' current income is a necessary condition for human welfare some minimum level of assets is also necessary for what Amartya Sen (1999) calls 'opportunity freedom' – the capacity to make choices and to shape one's life plan over time. A fair start in life depends on many things but amongst them is surely some savings or some financial assets that make choice possible.*

Glennerster discusses this aspect of asset-based policies in relation to both financial assets as well as human capital. Whilst this focus on human capital relates, in part, with Sherraden's physiological benefits, for Glennerster the more behavioural outcomes of learning to save and make future-orientated decisions (key reasons advocated for the CTF) are 'second order stuff': perhaps establishing a further link with Sherraden in that it is the asset-effect not the savings habit: which is essential. Subsequently Glennerster is more interested in tackling the vast inequalities in wealth, which as Dorling et al (2007) show, have not only become increasingly polarised but they have done so geographically. Furthermore, Dorling et al show the potential post-2000 picture: they conclude that headline poverty levels will continue to rise with socio-economic groups as geographical polarisation increases. Thus for those wealthy families located predominately in South East England, Glennerster argues, the presence of an asset which can act as a cushion and provide access to credit and financial services and future inheritance, distinguishes the middle classes from the trapped working classes: consequently there was a need to increase the scale of the CTF and expand asset-based policies.

Whilst asset-policies may help tackle wealth inequalities at the financial level, Sherraden's argument focuses on the human capital aspect. He believes that assets provide a stable base from which individuals can plan their future and take risks which were previously denied them. Assets improve economic stability, stimulate the development of human and other capital, and allow individuals to

focus and specialise, whilst connecting them to a hopeful and viable future. Paxton (2001a) supports this analysis and links it to the argument of Bynner (2001). Bynner claims that this asset-effect is generated not by high levels of wealth, but is experienced when assets range between £200-£500. However it is worth considering that such a low level of assets would not be acceptable to those who favour policies tackling wealth inequalities. From this research it is possible to argue that any potential CTF sum after 18 years would be sufficient for the asset-effect to occur; for it is not simply how much of an asset is held, but the holding of an asset over a period of time which matters.

But here we can build on the links between Sherraden's individualised psychological effects and Glennerster's sociological view. Clustered within geographical areas of low levels of wealth young people will not only lack the financial inheritance of their peers in wealthier areas, but the most disadvantaged young people are likely to have their social, psychological and financial assets eroded or damaged in some way (Drakeford and Gregory, 2010). As such it is the combined impact of the asset-effect and redistribution through the CTF which starts to tackle wealth inequalities, diminished social mobility, and limited equality of opportunity rather than a policy which simply develops a savings habit along with financial knowledge and skills. It is within this context that the CTF must be considered.

## Exploring opposition to the child trust fund

Before considering the relationship between the CTF and youth transitions it is important to reflect upon the reasons why the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government decided to scrap the CTF. Both the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties have long criticised the CTF. The Liberal Democrats argued for its abolition since it was implemented, calling for the funds to be redirected into investment in education; whilst Conservative criticism relates to benefits for low income families, who have lower levels of 'take-up' and save less money; they also refer to it as a luxury (Le Grand, Winter 09/10).

The criticisms of the Liberal Democrat standpoint have been developed at both practical and theoretical levels. As White (nd) shows, the money which the Liberal Democrats would allocate to education could come from other sources, without poorer children losing a right to capital. Although it may be true, as Van Parijs (1995) argues, that spreading the asset over a lifetime rather than one lump sum at a certain age will grant greater benefits (following the basic income idea), this would be a very different policy to the CTF and is not the focus here. Building on White's critique in relation to the CTF which offered small levels of redistribution providing potential benefits for young people and their families: especially if savings were held in a credit union (Drakeford and Gregory 2008a, b). The wider benefits of an up-rated CTF, as argued for by Glennerster, in tackling wealth inequalities should not have been overlooked.



White (2007) further highlights some contradictions in the history and ideology of the Liberal Democrats and their opposition to the CTF. For example he highlights the Liberal tradition by quoting Dodds (1957: 20-21; cited in White, 2007: 24-25):

*... here as everywhere, on creating conditions favourable to the development of personality, Liberals are necessarily distributists [...] Liberals therefore seek to spread wealth, ownership, power and responsibility as widely as possible. Thanks largely to their initiative, much has already been done to spread income [...] Little or nothing, however, has been done to spread property; yet this [...] is vital to the spreading of choice and the certainty of greater equality of opportunity.*

This, White argues, highlights the central idea of Liberal policies which are against socialism (concentrating property in the state) and Conservatism (preserving inequality of private property), which leads to the goal of ownership for all. White also considers various arguments put forward by the Liberal Democrats: their objection based on how young people might use the money unwisely. He explains that this does not resonate with notions of freedom and responsibility, especially as the CTF is designed to promote responsible use specifically through financial literacy and more generally through the asset-effect. Finally, he counters David Laws' (who as Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced the abolition of the CTF) concerns over paternalism caused by the CTF. For it is not parents who receive the funds but newborn babies, thus parents act as Trustees and are not being restricted for their own good, but are subject to the 'impeccably Liberal (Millian) principle of restricting the liberty of parents for the good of their children' (White, 2007: 28).

Initially the Conservatives supported the policy, until the period before the 2010 election when they shifted their stance (*Guardian*, 4th January 2010). The intention became to abolish the CTF for all but the poorest third of families, arguing that this will still ensure that the money reached all children in need. Drawing on statistics around account openings the Conservatives argued that the policy was failing those who really needed the CTF and as such had become ineffective. However the automatic opening of accounts a year after the voucher has been issued does partially overcome this. Nevertheless, a more suitable solution might be to work with credit unions and welfare professionals to engage low-income families in the community to realise the potential of their child's CTF, as is the case in Wales (see Drakeford and Gregory, 2008a, b, 2010). Additionally, it is not necessarily the amount of asset that is held by the children, but the presence of an asset, which instigates the asset-effects and associated benefits (see Bynner, above). Their critique did highlight an important issue over take-up: perhaps refining, rather than abolishing the policy would have been beneficial.

As with the previous Labour Government, the focus has been on the long-term savings account: the promise of 'jam tomorrow and not today'. This generated criticism based on research that

shows the importance of early years investment (for example, Fabians, 2006). Yet this early years investment is still a central concern for ABW theorists; but rather than focus on one method of intervention ABW opens up a wider range of tools for attempting to prevent poor life chances being determined at such an early age. By ignoring the wider arguments of an asset-effect and potential for wealth redistribution (in part due to Labour's focus on the savings habit) the full promise of asset-based policies was overlooked.

## Young people's transitions

The CTF and its potential asset-effect relate strongly to youth transitions to adulthood (Gregory, 2010). Through this notion of transition it is possible to argue that three key destinations occur: a move from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood; the end of schooling and the beginning of working life; and leaving the family of origin to the family of destination. Proponents of the CTF argue that the policy has a role to play in helping young people achieve any of these transitions, and so it is important to consider transitions more generally.

Research into young people's transitions to adulthood highlights increasing flexibility and complexity. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) link this to the problems of individualisation and the growth of risk in contemporary society, whilst Catan (2004) highlights a polarisation of independence and increasing marginalisation of a significant minority of young people from families in financial hardship. Individualisation generates transition pathways which are more fluid and varied, less linear and with a looser relationship to class origins. Accordingly, young people have to navigate a number of challenges in contemporary society without being able to draw upon their parents' past experiences to cope with these conditions. Consequently young people reaching maturity have to make key decisions which will shape their adult lives; they do so with the knowledge that increased mobility of the global capital market requires market flexibility generating associated stresses on non-market life. As weakened collectivist traditions are no longer influencing young people in their decision making, ABW can be developed to help young people cope with these fluid and individualised changes.

Yet, where issues of child poverty are concerned, navigating these fluid transitions can be increasingly difficult. The necessary assets and capabilities, which others can take for granted, are either absent or reduced for those from low-income (and low-wealth) families and communities. As such, linking back to Sherradan's view on positive and negative schemas, these young people are likely to be associated with troubled family lives, lower claims on everyday goods and services and conflictual relationships with schools. This is especially true for other groups as well, such as young offenders. Exploring the difficulty of these transitions in practice, Jones et al. (2006) show how the length of young people's transitions relates to their ability to draw on assets to

gain independence from their parents. Where these assets are missing, young people have long, protracted and fractured transitions which often generate difficulties with family members.

The Social Exclusion Unit (2005) has also recognised dramatic changes in young people's lives between the ages of 16 and 25. During this time, young people are in greater need for services, because the decisions they make around education and work impact on their whole life. Focusing on specific problems experienced when moving into adulthood, the report identifies the need for more effective services fitted to individual needs. These needs and the difficult transitions that some young people have to make have been highlighted in various studies (eg. Hall 2003, Jones et al, 2004, 2006). Whilst public services offer one solution, it is possible to argue that the CTF offers additional support, as described above, which balances out collectively pooled resources to tackle hardship with a base foundation for 'opportunity freedom': it is not a case of one or the other, but of joined-up, holistic policy interventions.

Jones et al, (2004) build on this, but contradict Furlong and Cartmel, by showing that social class retains a role in shaping young people's transitions. This involves the reproduction of beliefs and cultural capital, but also transfers of wealth. Notions of wealth are key to the discussion of child poverty. For Jones et al. changes in transitions extend dependence on parents, compromising young people's freedom and choices in constructing their individualised biographies. This is the result of the reliance on parental financial resources which can be provided to, or withheld from, the young person depending on their compliance with their parents' desires. The potential for conflict and deferred emancipation of young people can lead to serious consequences such as homelessness (see Jones et al, 2006 and Hall 2003). Therefore, while, as the SEU report argues, increased availability of public services can benefit young people in their navigation of extended, fluid transitions to adulthood, the support of a financial asset can further aid these efforts. The Child Trust Fund therefore offers a source of asset which can help young people make key decisions regarding their future.

## The Child Trust Fund and Higher Education

Whilst the intention of this paper is not to repeat discussions presented elsewhere (see Gregory and Drakeford, 2005) it is necessary to briefly outline some issues surrounding the use of the Child Trust Fund. Whilst IDAs have been designed with specific end-use conditions (usually to support higher education, home ownership or business start-up) the CTF was designed to be open ended. This, it was argued, would allow 18 year olds to use their account in a way which most closely reflected their own choices around future educational, career and life courses. Thus, whilst an early Liberal Democrat critique of the scheme rested on the idea that the CTF was worthless as it would be insignificant against Labour's university tuition fee rise to £3,000; this was based on two inaccurate ideas.

Firstly, that young people who chose to use their CTF funds towards their university education would do so in addition to mechanisms that already exist for university study. As such the CTF could provide additional support towards access to resources such as accommodation rent (see Gregory and Drakeford, 2005). It is interesting to note that this resource will now no longer be available to young people when they are faced with the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition proposed university fees of £6,000 – £9,000 per year. Secondly not all young people with a CTF would go to university: many would follow a different career and have opportunity freedom supported by the CTF. An often reported concern in the media during the debate around the proposed university fee increase is that many young people will be deterred from attending university. They will not, therefore, receive the various bursaries and grants available to students, they will not have a CTF: they will have only the opportunities offered them by family when making life altering decisions.

By removing a means of building up an asset, with government support, young people will lack this financial resource, lack support for opportunity freedom and will not have developed the asset-effect: deprived of Sherraden's positive schema which allows young people to realise new opportunities and choices available to them. When it comes to higher education, or any other pathway, the asset held in the form of the CTF is not only important because it provides some financial security against risk taking but it helps to foster a realisation that those 'risks' exist in the first place, that the opportunities are available to young people and they can reach out and take them.

## Assets as integral support to transitions

The changes to youth transitions in contemporary society have created severe problems for young people entering maturity. This is particularly reinforced by the limitations parents may put on uses of financial support (Jones et al, 2004, 2006). Asset-based welfare offered a means by which young people can overcome these difficulties. Initially, by holding the Child Trust Fund, a young person grew up with the knowledge that they have an asset available to them at the end of their 'childhood', which they can use to make important decisions which will shape the course of their adult lives. The overall asset-effect would have allowed young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to grow up knowing that they had an asset which belonged to them; thus opening up a future which would otherwise be unavailable: the asset matters, it changes how young people apply themselves in their education and daily conduct.

When we look at the more practical level, divided into the financial, social and psychological asset-effects, we can see a range of potential benefits that holding a CTF may bring. Economically, Asset Based Welfare can help young people to build up their own financial capability to tackle future difficulties; but also support decision-making by young people at critical points in their lives:

decisions over employment, training, housing or education. Additionally, assets provide a source of support when unexpected events occur (e.g. unemployment or homelessness). Socially the CTF moves people towards asset and wealth equality, potentially generating a range of benefits described by Wilkinson (2005; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Finally, young people benefit psychologically, not only by perceiving opportunities and futures where none previously existed, but also by having the financial security in which to achieve these possibilities.

Rowlingson (2000) argued financial security is the key issue for young people's future orientation: perhaps suggesting wealth redistribution would have greater impact than individualised psychological benefits. Rowlingson (2006: 38) explains, individuals 'in insecure economic situations feel that they have less control over the future than others'. Although her analysis does not specifically discuss assets, she warns that the policy shift from collective state planning towards individual planning will be damaging to those with low income/wealth stocks who have less capacity to plan. However, as previously discussed, it should not be a decision between services or assets but a question of how to deliver both.

The CTF offers the opportunity for young people to better navigate and control their transitions into adulthood by giving them the freedom and power to decide. Protracted and fluid transitions for those from poverty-stricken households result from a lack of independent asset, zero or limited parental assets and subsequent compliance to parental wishes to access any asset (Jones et al 2004, 2006). The problems which this generates have been highlighted by Jones et al and Hall, who show how homelessness and family problems can result from problematic transitions. Situations like this, at the onset of adulthood, will have a negative impact on these young people's futures and adult lives. Whilst public services attempt to counter these difficulties (homeless hostels, drug rehabilitation services), these are very much about tackling problems once they have occurred. Rather than dealing with people when they have become 'problematic', assets, like public services such as Sure Start (a government programme investing in early education, childcare, health and family support) and education, invest in people to help them make use of their own capabilities to start their adult lives in a positive way.

Thus establishing asset-policies is not to argue for provision based on 'either/or'. On the one hand, 'problem solving' services deal with the consequences of risk and failure through collective provision, just as, on the other hand, services designed to invest in people and communities to try and avoid disruptive events that can cause deprivation and hardship. These can both relate to collective funding and provision, as taxation on income provides current services and is central to wealth redistribution (Glennester and McKnight, 2006). Thus it is not the position here that traditional public service provision is replaced by asset-based policies, rather that asset-based policies can complement traditional welfare assistance.

## The CTF and social mobility

The final issue to consider is that of social mobility. There has been renewed focus on the reduced pace at which social mobility has been occurring in Britain (Williams, 2009 a, b; Bell and Lance, 2009, and Scott, 2009). In relation to this the previous Labour Government requested ex-Cabinet minister Alan Milburn to explore social mobility within the professions (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2009). The final report argued that internships and other such mechanisms which open up the professions to young people are closed off to some groups of people who lack the means to support themselves during these unpaid internships. Consequently, they are barred from access to the professions. The CTF offered a means by which this barrier can be overcome: as financial support and a means of access otherwise denied to the young person.

It is possible to critique this report based on a number of assumptions. Firstly, that its analysis toes-the-line with the New Labour focus on meritocracy (Drakeford, 2010b) and as such focuses on clearing the path for the talented, ambitious and energetic – those with the ability and resolution to climb to the top. Drakeford argues that the National Equality Panel report shows that the continued existence of inequality over the life-cycle and between generations requires a renewed focus on equality, inclusion and co-operation. Perhaps here then, the CTF had more to offer, because it did not simply focus resources on the talented and ambitious few, but was provided to everyone through progressive universalism. By opening up opportunities, the CTF operated as a tool to help tackle some of those barriers to greater social mobility.

Secondly, whilst it would be unfair to claim that the CTF could have improved social mobility by itself, it does link with a more personalised approach to helping low income groups which is necessary to challenge the meritocratic elite who intend to remake society in their image (Williams, 2009a). Here the argument follows the notion that politicians who form and influence policy do so on assumptions regarding human behaviour around ‘pushy parents’ and a fetishising of higher education as the generators of increased social mobility. As Williams points out, this is based on a blunt, statistically-driven approach, reinforced by the recent focus on ‘nudge’ behavioural economics which can only ever consider the most frequent outcomes and not the extremes of young people not in education, employment or training on the one hand and high achievers from low income groups on the other. Subsequently there is a need for a more personalised approach which allows for the rich variety of characteristics that may be key to predicting social mobility to become the focus of policy attention.

Finally as Berthoud (2003, cited in Williams, 2009a) shows, there are six barriers to social mobility (family structure, skill level, disability, age, low labour demand, and ethnic group), of which only one relates to education. As such we can see further potential benefits of the CTF in tackling social mobility: its unrestricted end use allows for opportunity freedom. The CTF, granted

greater flexibility, may have helped to generate a more personalised approach to tackling social mobility to reverse its decline. This would be in addition to the (admittedly small) amount of asset redistribution that took place. Whilst notions of distributional justice require that we should be concerned to ensure everybody's life goes well, notions of personal responsibility dictate that the fate of each person should be sensitive to their own choices. As such, the CTF sought to reflect that sensitivity to choices while being insensitive to their circumstances – by providing greater support to the least well-off, but leaving the choices over the use of the asset to the individual.

## Maintaining initiative

To achieve these 'personalised' outcomes it would have been necessary to tackle some of the challenges outlined above, particularly the low take-up and savings by disadvantaged families. In Wales, policy has developed links with credit unions (Welsh Assembly Government. 2009; Drakeford and Gregory, 2008a, b) and this offered a means of reaching out and providing support to the most disadvantaged families so that they not only gain awareness of the CTF but benefit from credit union membership. Furthermore, social workers could also have been involved with the CTF (Gregory and Drakeford, 2005; and Drakeford and Gregory 2010). More generally, welfare professionals play key roles in the lives of disadvantaged young people and, as such, could have joined up their work with the CTF to help foster the asset-effect, by using the existence of the CTF to help young people consider their potential opportunities in the future and encourage them to work towards these enhanced goals.

This was seen as an important step because whilst the first cohort with CTFs would have access to them in 2020, welfare professionals would be engaging with this group at a much earlier time. However the cohort of young people with CTF accounts will still have active accounts which offers a rare opportunity to actually compare the benefits of asset-holding by young people against those who have no CTF. This requires that welfare professionals actively engage with those with CTFs, to ensure that they are aware of the opportunities the asset offers to help foster the asset-effect.

## Conclusion

Whilst the Labour Party, towards the end of its time in government, developed a number of initiatives to fund opportunities for young people (such as the Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Bank), the Child Trust Fund, as an asset-based policy, offered not only a means of fostering the asset-effect to aid young people in their transitions to adulthood; it also offered some solution to problems facing the welfare state. As Paxton (2001b) argues the challenges facing the modern welfare state require the use of new tools. Historically, welfare theory considered human welfare in terms of consumption, subsequently, policy responses focused on income transfers. There is a

need to expand this framework to incorporate ABW to achieve a greater horizontal distribution of assets to satisfy notions of social justice. This change becomes more important when we consider how life patterns and transitions for individuals have become more complex.

The potential benefits of this asset-effect have been related to the transition from youth to adulthood. It is at this point in a person's development that key decisions are made which affect the course of their life; and this paper has set out to show how, despite increasing the complexity and fluidity of these transitions, it is possible for assets to play a role in stabilising transitions and opening up opportunities which social position currently denies. The overarching claim is that, despite criticism, the CTF offered a means to tackle social immobility, provide opportunity freedom and empower young people in a way that further moves them out of poverty. Assets provide a means of achieving this in a way which does not associate with the negative and stigmatising attitudes often attributed to traditional income maintenance, but builds on the capabilities of individuals in a positive and liberating way.

Whilst some will always be concerned with how young people use the CTF, notions of distributional justice seek to allow free choice in deciding one's future, whilst tackling the inequalities that limit opportunities and social mobility. Bearing this in mind an opportunity now exists to see if the asset-effect occurs in young people by comparing those with a CTF against their peers who will go without. However this will not only rely on welfare professionals taking the initiative and help young people to engage with their CTF account, but, as Rowlingson (2006) argues, needs to move beyond asset accumulation to consider asset use.

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## Reviews

*Patrick Ayre and Michael Preston-Shoot (eds.)*

### **Children's Services at the Crossroads: A Critical Evaluation of Contemporary Policy for Practice**

Russell House Publishing 2010

ISBN: 978-1-905541-64-5

pp. 134

Louisa Thomson

**C**HILDREN'S SERVICES at the Crossroads is a collection of writing exploring the impact of recent policy changes on the ability of social workers to carry out their roles. The authors are keen to stress that this is not the work of academics removed from the reality of practice. Instead, they aim to highlight the organisational and relational weaknesses in current provision and to propose systemic changes to prevent children's services from becoming 'locked into a vicious spiral of decline from which it will be hard to recover' (p. 2). The focus is on child safeguarding, youth offending, children in care and family support, rather than a broader conception of children's services.

In the introduction, Ayre and Preston-Shoot argue that change is required at both central government and managerial level in order to help social workers 'rediscover their identity and efficacy' (p. 6). They suggest that the obstacles have come from within – a combination of the target culture from central government, and too much emphasis on compliance with process and procedure from management. These arguments draw on the conclusions of the *Social Work Task Force Report* and the Laming inquiry that there is a loss of confidence amongst social workers, too much bureaucracy and emphasis on targets. The risk is that the essential relationships at the heart of the profession are being lost.

*Children's Services at the Crossroads* is divided into three parts: the policy context; service delivery issues; and research evidence on services. The first section includes chapters on Wales and Scotland, drawing out the differences in the ways that children's services have developed in the devolved administrations. Wales has a distinctive policy framework, founded on a rights perspective, and Scotland has managed to develop a co-ordinated approach across agencies without a major reorganisation of children's services.

The second section focuses on the 'tragicomedy' of social care for children reform. Ayre and Calder highlight the climate of fear, blame and mistrust around child protection and suggest that as the

development in policy and practice has largely arisen out of responses to bad cases, it is somewhat inevitable that the system has become weighed down with unhelpful biases. Morris's chapter on the challenge for prevention for social work, argues that the New Labour focus on social exclusion meant that social work became part of a larger grouping of professionals and ultimately families have lost out as there has been no decrease in demand for services for children in need.

The final section explores the organisational and managerial context of social work more closely. Preston-Shoot's experiences uncover 'a litany of lessons unlearned' (p. 84), and he draws on case law evidence to highlight the weaknesses in technical and managerial practices. A lack of effective management and support for social workers are key problems that need to be addressed. Chard and Ayre discuss the idea of a 'competent workplace' where individuals are empowered and collective learning is promoted. Reflexive practice lies at the centre of this.

Forrester's chapter on evidence based practice, also focuses on solutions to move the debate forward – and argues that the managerial and bureaucratic approaches which are now dominant can be addressed through a commitment to using evidence-based ways. This requires an approach that opens itself up to evaluation 'carefully observing what practitioners do when they meet clients, measuring the impact of this and by doing so, developing better practice' (p. 124).

The chapters in this book all seek to explain what the issues are in children's services and there are several major themes that run through the collection – namely, the loss of professional autonomy and the impact this has on the ability of social workers to form meaningful relationships with service users. As a result there is a need to rediscover therapeutic practice, referring back to the core values that underpin the profession – starting with, as Pitts suggests in his chapter on youth justice, the rediscovery of the child and the original spirit of *Every Child Matters*.

The second key theme is the criticism of audit cultures and quantitative targets which means that the focus on process and procedure masks the quality of services that are actually being delivered. The editors suggest in the final chapter that there are much needed improvements to be made at management level – to promote supportive management systems and help support informed, reflective and critically challenged staff.

There are a few gaps in the analysis – the current context of fiscal constraint is briefly referred to, but there is little exploration of what this might mean in order to realise the vision of systemic changes proposed in the book. There is a tension that Forrester briefly alludes to – the extent to which the state should specify services and the degree to which professionals should be left to deliver, which merits further debate or there is the risk of some of the arguments in this collection appearing to advocate no controls around the quality of service. Finally, there are very few practical examples and case studies brought in to illustrate what has worked which might have helped to

bring out some of the positives for the reader and avoid demoralising practitioners who read this.

Overall, this collection offers a timely analysis of the issues facing children's services and the threats and challenges to the practice of social workers. It is clearly set out and includes some practical suggestions to improve support for social workers, make changes to organisational cultures and lead to improvements in the relationships with the individuals and groups who rely on these services.

**Louisa Thomson is an ESRC CASE student at the Open University working on a project for the NYA.**

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*Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion (eds)*

**Religion and Youth**

Ashgate 2010

ISBN: 9780754667681

Price: £17.99 (pbk)

pp. 278

Richard Davies

**A**T 27 CHAPTERS, split into six sections, this edited book offers a plethora of perspectives on the state of play at the interface of sociology, religion and young people. If I have one major criticism it is the size of the chapters (around 3-4000 words) which are too small for the development of the myriad of interesting ideas presented. For some, well published contributors, this word limitation was solved by referring the reader to their other more substantial works; for others one was left uncertain as to the status of, and evidence for, the claims being made.

Having said this, it is a book to be commended, especially for the generally intelligent non-specialist reader, and for students looking for a balanced gateway into sociological reflections on religion and young people. If I have one further reservation it is the title: it nearly does exactly what it says, but sociology seemed to have been missed off. Whilst not all contributors would, I think, self-identify as sociologists, nevertheless that discipline dominates the collection.

The six sections: Generations and their legacy; The Big Picture: surveys of beliefs and practices; Expression; Identity; Transmission; and Researching Youth Religion; offer between 3 and 6 chapters each varying between considerations of theoretical models (for example, Lynch's critique of the use of Generation X in analysing youth and religion) and more narrative discussions of particular religious practices (for example, Cush on Teenage Witchcraft). Cush's chapter is in the minority in having a non-Christian foundation (see also chapters by Singh, and Minganti), by

which I mean that although the subject matter of many chapters does have resonance beyond a Christian worldview, the vocabularies position them as having distinctively Christian origin.

Individually the chapters are of a high quality and sit well together as a collection without seeking an artificial homogeneity. Given this it is perhaps unfair to identify ‘highlights’ and this, no doubt, reflects the reviewer’s philosophical interests. Nevertheless, one might mention Lynch’s critique of the vocabulary of ‘generations’. He draws attention to the difficulties of defining the age limits on different generations and the often implicit assumption that age, in and of itself, means something in terms of common experiences and perspective. This is clearly not the case and Lynch, in a nuanced way, considers both the value Generation X language has played in the sociology of religion, but also its many shortcomings and the need for a new theoretical framework for future study. It is clear from the rest of the book that such an alternative is not readily available; this is perhaps inevitable given that a rejection of cohort-theoretical accounts militates against any book concerned with the subject of ‘youth’.

The book’s other key word ‘religion’ is also brought into question and particularly its relationship to ‘god’ and ‘spirituality’. Christian Smith, writing from an American context, discusses the shift towards ‘moralistic therapeutic deism’ that emerges from his research, and Mason offers his own insight into Australian young people’s views of religion and spirituality, focusing on the implications of individualism amongst the survey sample. Such considerations, significant in and of themselves, also provide a useful way into the final section on researching religion and youth. I found Collins-Mayo and Rankin’s reflections on their own work helpful and illuminating – though as with a number of other chapters would have liked more than the word limit allowed.

Linda Woodhead in an epilogue to the book captures its essential contribution to the broader academic debate. After considering the rebellion of the boomer generation she writes:

*Does this suggest that the ‘new’ youth rebellion will be towards rather than away from religion? The contributions in this volume tell us that the answer is complex, and that it depends on whom you are talking to and about. They leave us in no doubt that it is no longer helpful to speak of ‘youth’ or ‘youth culture’ in an undifferentiated way...the rejection of historically-contingent kinds of religion and secularity, combined with the influence of new global flows of information and people, is resulting in the opening up of a richer array of religious and secular resources on which young people are drawing in new ways, inflected by ethnicity, class, gender and other variables. (p. 240)*

It is worth, as a final point, commending the editors both for their construction of the collection and their introduction and conclusion, which do exactly what they were designed for without the additional aspiration to introduce a range of their own particular interests. Collins-Mayo’s

introduction gives a clear account of what to expect and the underlying approach to the book as a whole, Dandelion's conclusion draws together the themes generated and without imposing order seeks to identify commonalities in the various views expressed. If I were greedy then I would have liked the Judaeo-Christian presuppositions to have been laid bare and opened to some, if only limited, critique. In a review one can be over critical, so the last word must be one of commendation, a book worth buying if you are interested in thinking about the lives of young people and the choices they make. It is not just for those concerned with religion, as Beckworth notes in the foreword:

*In short, the engagement of young people with religions and spiritualities is not only interesting in itself but is also a challenge to social scientists who seek to understand broader patterns of continuity and change in the development of societies and countries.*

(p. xxiv)

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*Janet Batsleer and Bernard Davies (eds.)*

**What is Youth Work?**

Learning Matters 2010

ISBN 9781844454662

£17

pp. 181

Sally Carr

**B**ATSLEER AND DAVIES' edited text offers a rich insight into aspects of Youth Work practice, policy and legislation. A varied cast of new and emerging voices in youth work as well as those familiar to many of us have contributed to this valuable book.

'What is Youth Work?' is a question often asked by those outside of the profession and, with a reflective eye, by those within youth work. Yet it is often shrouded by mystery, partly because of the many settings and situations within which the work can take place. The opening chapter, What do we mean by Youth Work? by Bernard Davies, provides understanding which enables the reader to navigate this diverse field. Davies puts forward the guiding values of voluntary participation: tipping the balance of power in favour of young people; working through young people's friendship groups as starting points; and developing association, to name but a few. This chapter reveals the key values of youth work, enabling the reader to have a clear foundation on which to understand all youth work practice. In the current climate of rapid policy change these values provide the worker



with a compass to find a route through an often torrid tide of upheaval, and they must be held dear if youth work is to maintain its core purpose.

Referring to key documents from the Labour administration such as *Every Child Matters*, the book provides the reader with an insight into the quandaries of policy regarding children and young people, in particular the balance between control and care. Due to a change in political administration, with the creation of the Conservative/ Liberal Democrat coalition government in May 2010 and the emerging theme of ‘Big Society’, the text may seem dated in parts with regard to some youth work policy. For example, pre-election the ‘Five outcomes / Every Child Matters’ agenda was still very current, whereas post-election ‘help children achieve more’ became the accepted phraseology. The reader must be mindful of this, while recognising that this may be a rhetorical shift rather than an actual shift in policy.

The content of the book appears to favour some of the interests of the editors, for example work with girls and young women (Chapter 10, Youth work with girls: a feminist perspective, by Ali Hanbury, Amelia Lee and Janet Batsleer), and this is most welcome. Like other chapters, this clearly places the youth worker’s role as either educationalist or activist. In a climate of youth work being seen by those outside of the profession as a means to contain and entertain ‘troublesome’ young people, rather than its true intention of engaging and enabling young people, it is very pleasing to look in detail at the youth work role in the latter contexts. That said, the role of recreational youth work must not be forgotten, as this may form a substantial part of the experience of some new workers coming into the profession. For these workers, some elements of the text may be initially alien to them. Chapter 12 by Tania de St Croix (Youth work and the surveillance state) looks at generic youth work in a detached setting and offers an insight into some of the dilemmas workers face when trying to offer educational and activist youth work in what could so easily be a recreational setting. Any update of the book may benefit from looking at the role of the educational or activist youth worker in generic, centre-based provision.

The book is written for a target audience of Youth and Community Work students. However, the ‘best practice’ examples peppered throughout the text allow for a wider audience to appreciate and be invigorated by both the range and style of Youth Work in particular fields, for example arts-based work (eg. Chapter 6, Creativity and partnership by Raj Patel). All in all, a poignant and insightful text for our time as we all struggle to keep the true purpose of Youth Work alive.

**Sally Carr is a youth worker at an LGBT youth provision and has set up youth work projects across the North West region.**

*Phil Harris*

**The Concerned Other: How to change problematic drug and alcohol users through their family members. A complete manual**

Russell House Publishing 2010

ISBN: 978-1-9055541-48-5

£16.95 (Pbk)

Naomi Ryan

*THE CONCERNED OTHER* is a comprehensive manual and potentially a training programme that provides professionals or family members themselves with the tools to work with the family members of problematic drug and alcohol users. The manual is separated into two parts, 'The context' and 'the programme'. The context section of the book somewhat buries the reader in theory. However this theory comprehensively sets the scene for the programme. The context section cleverly explores the social and therapeutic context of the programme which draws in both audiences, the 'concerned other' (family member) and the professional.

The programme is separated into specific sections with appropriate work sheets to be completed. The programme states that it can be delivered by professionals to concerned family members, or that family members could work through it on their own. The underlying principle of the programme is that it provides concerned family members with skills, knowledge and encouragement so they are not alone and can support family members through a problematic drug or alcohol issue. The premise of the programme is that more people than just the problematic user require support from professionals, but that the support they require is different. It also acknowledges that the family members may be best placed to deliver support to the user. This principle is very much in line with the previous Government's 'Think Family' agenda (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2007).

Having worked in this field for a number of years I feel that there is not a joined up approach of services, and that extended and even immediate family members of people in crisis are not considered. Consequently this programme felt like a breath of fresh air.

However, I was surprised to find as I got further into the book that while the issues regarding drug and alcohol abuse are extremely well researched and documented, other areas lack knowledge in a front-line and practical sense. These areas have to be seen as key. Child Protection issues should always be paramount when working with a whole family and yet seemed to be skimmed over. The section regarding Domestic Abuse is particularly weak and I believe for use as a professional it would have to be alongside something more substantial. This part of the book was flawed in its thinking. The author suggests that if the 'concerned other' is a victim of domestic abuse, that they look at ways to minimise the threat of the violence which inadvertently implies they are in some way to be blamed for being a victim and it's their fault. This is followed by a statement 'should

these strategies fail...' (p. 215). It is not necessarily appropriate for the author to ask a victim to put themselves in this position. A victim of domestic abuse may be at risk of serious injury and death if he or she takes back some of the control and/or attempts to leave or alter the relationship. The list of emergency contact numbers regarding staying safe from domestic abuse lists 999 ninth on the list when it should surely be reinforced as an immediate point of call when one is in immediate danger.

I am aware that the last paragraph appears negative but I strongly believe that there are flaws in this book and consequently in this programme. That aside however, the programme and book are written in an extremely positive manner that begins where the family, user, and 'concerned other' are. If you are able to focus and read through the initial context section of the book then there is no assumed knowledge required: it is laid out for you to digest and then move on to the programme. The only issue is that it is academic in style and consequently rather difficult to read and could be overwhelming should a family wish to take on this programme. It would be an almighty task coupled with the already stressful environment in which they are operating with a problematic drug user.

The resources attached to this programme are varied and would be extremely useful with families. The book provides the information required to carry out the work and therefore in most respects does stand alone. The fact that having purchased the book one can request electronic copies of the paperwork makes it more usable.

In conclusion, *The Concerned Other* is a valuable resource and will inform my practice in the future. I would just express a word of caution in relation to the domestic abuse section, and advise family members and practitioners to seek further support prior to engaging in that aspect of the programme.

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*Sylvia Collins-Mayo, Bob Mayo and Sally Nash with Christopher Cocksworth*

**The Faith of Generation Y**

Church House Publishing 2010

ISBN 978 0 7151 4206 6

£14.99 (pbk)

pp. 153

Naomi Stanton

**T**HIS IS ONE of those rare books that is both useful to the academic and accessible for the practitioner. Collins-Mayo et al present a two-part discussion that explores their research through the lenses of both sociology and theology. The discussion is based on the findings of their recent research into young people's engagement with Christian youth work. The research involved a qualitative study of young people's attitudes towards Christian beliefs and traditions, with a particular focus on those young people who had no affiliation with the faith other than attending a Christian-led youth club.

The introduction and opening chapters set the scene, exploring the political and religious contexts for the current generation of young people (Generation Y), in relation to, for example, recent world events and statistics on religious engagement. The authors argue that young people do not share the same hostility towards Christianity of the previous generation, but through their parents' rejection of the faith, the transmission of the Christian narrative has broken down. They suggest that Western modernisation and individualisation have undermined the authority of church, and question the effectiveness of youth work in teaching young people about Christianity, particularly after its professionalisation, and the rise of secular training programmes undertaken by many Christian youth workers.

The sociological section provides an accessible exploration of theory, particularly that of Grace Davie and Danielle Hervieu-Leger. The authors draw on Davie's notion of 'vicarious religion' and argue that the young people in their study still see the church as practising on their behalf although they are not actively engaged. They claim that the Christian 'chain of memory', as termed by Hervieu-Leger, is broken for Generation Y and that it needs to be re-established if young people are to reach any level of 'Christian consciousness'.

In viewing their research findings through a sociological lens, the authors develop a useful and considered theory which they term 'immanent faith'. This is based on what they describe as a 'secular trinity' of family, friends and self and represents the influences young people draw on in determining and validating belief in an individualistic society. The authors assert that young people largely define their own beliefs in the contemporary context, and look to others for 'mutual validation' of their beliefs. They also add further evidence to the idea of young people's 'happy

‘midi-narrative’, proposed in their previous book, in that young people seek happiness and fulfilment for the present and near future. The book considers the significance of space, place, community and tradition in young people’s engagement with Christianity. The importance of a moral community for consolidating young people’s individual ethics is stressed. It is proposed that their lack of engagement in a faith community, and the notion of choice promoted by youth work, allows them to validate morals and beliefs on an individual basis. The research findings indicate that religious buildings do hold significance for young people but that they often do their religious thinking alone in their bedroom. Collins-Mayo et al term this ‘bedroom spirituality’, and in these moments of individual reflection they found that the young people sometimes engaged in prayer, the only Christian tradition they found non-churchgoing young people to have taken on. However prayer could be argued to be as much a personal response to religion as it is an inherited tradition.

The theological section of the book follows on to consolidate the authors’ assertion that youth work is not working, and that the church should form a community of faith for young people. They claim the church to be the ‘antidote to individualisation’ and its role to be one of maintaining Christian memory and tradition. They criticise the liberalism of youth work and believe its promotion of choice over ‘truth’ to be its downfall. It is this critique of the youth work method that I really struggle with in this book, as well as the institutional dominance that runs throughout its discourse. Youth workers do not give young people choice, young people have choice, which the youth workers allow them to explore and it is to the youth work programmes and not church that young people are generally inclined to choose to go.

Brierley (2003) celebrates the use of informal education methods in youth ministry, and suggests that Jesus himself displayed the key characteristics of an informal educator, including teaching through discussion and promoting social justice, whilst rejecting the religious institution of his day. Much of my strong feeling about the book’s conclusions is down to a clash of narratives, mine as a youth worker and the authors’ in asserting the role of the church. Because of this clash I am not sure how far its conclusions are useful to the field, being undermining of much good youth work that is taking place and not really bridging the gap between problem and solution. It does provide one example of good practice, in the form of Fresh Expressions, a project that seeks to develop new expressions of church that are more accessible to young people without being disconnected from the community of faith. However, to do this, the Fresh Expressions groups employ the very methods of informal education the book is criticising. My own research finds a parallel criticism of Sunday Schools by those speaking on behalf of the church in the twentieth century. While the Sunday Schools continued to engage with young people in the early to mid-twentieth century, the churches struggled to maintain them into adulthood. Rather than looking for internal reasons for the struggle, the Sunday Schools were accused of creating a culture of ‘graduating church’ (Robson, 2007).

In conclusion the authors do provide a strong sociological insight into young people’s engagement with Christianity, particularly through their development of the theory of ‘immanent faith’ and the notion of

‘bedroom spirituality’, in relation to their findings. The research is perhaps a little one dimensional in focusing on those young people who engage only in the social aspect of Christian youth work rather than also those who have gone on to engage with the more explicit Christian teaching on offer. My own interviews with young people engaging with Christianity today has found that some access Christianity through the social activities on offer but progress into the more specific teaching groups, and may even find faith. However, though I may not agree with much of what lies inherent in its discourse about the role and perception of the institutional church for young people, I have not stopped thinking about the ideas and position this volume explores. That, from a book, is only ever a good thing.

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*Jon Ord*

**Youth work process, product and practice: Creating an authentic curriculum in work with young people**

Russell House Publishing 2007

ISBN 978-1-905541-11-9

£16.10 (pbk)

Roy Smith

**H**AVING BEEN involved in curriculum development for a local authority, I can appreciate some of the ethical and practical challenges Ord outlines in this book. Developing curriculum for a field as broad as youth work is a daunting task, risking alienation and restriction for those who are left to work within it. Curriculum can be seen as a definitive answer to those debates that frustrate governments and funders, whilst threatening to leave little room for practitioners to develop creative and meaningful work that is responsive to the young people they meet. Ord’s exploration of the history of curriculum development sheds light on the struggle between policy makers and practitioners over the values and direction of the work. Steering a ship between Jeffs and Smith’s apparent refusal to accept a youth work curriculum and Merton and Wylie’s attempts to forge a modern product based curriculum, Ord creates a compelling argument for process based

development, answering the need to communicate practice without reducing youth work to a box ticking exercise or removing young people's ability to shape the work.

Bernard Davies' introduction begins to question Ord's perspective on 'voluntary participation' which I agree is problematic, yet raises important questions about the nature of modern youth work. He argues that although it may be a 'very important dynamic' it should not be seen as 'a necessary condition for the youth work relationship' (p61). This argument refutes accusations that work outside the voluntary context ceases to be youth work, and in doing so appears to suggest we abandon the principle of voluntary participation as a cornerstone of practice. Ord fails to differentiate between physical and relational contexts and risks losing what many feel is a defining element of youth work. He is correct in his assessment that good work can happen in schools or other places where attendance may be compulsory, but misses the significance of choice in how we work; a young person may have to be in school, but they should have a choice as to whether and how they interact with any youth worker they meet there.

To some this will remain controversial, but in a reality where youth workers are under pressure to undertake increasingly targeted work it is vital that we maintain some boundaries, or we risk losing any professional distinction of what makes the work unique. It is the relationship which is voluntary not the physical context. An alternative example would be to ask whether the street becomes a compulsory context for work with a young person who has been kicked out of home, and what this might mean for a detached youth worker? Those working in publicly funded projects over the past decade will have faced significant challenges to the traditional values of youth work and hopefully navigated them to the benefit of young people. However, it is clear that a strong curriculum can only serve to protect the work and help practitioners clearly define their practice.

Ord's most significant criticism is aimed at the product based curriculum and performance management models that focus on measuring prescribed outcomes, especially considering the subjective nature of what constitutes contact, participation and recorded outcomes. Ord offers narratives as a more satisfying alternative and one that will find much support from practitioners, yet this area needs expansion. Although many recognise the importance of such qualitative accounts, it is insufficient to suggest they can provide adequate answers to the questions asked by government without further analysis. Perhaps the localism agenda will give youth work narratives the weight they need to evidence and protect quality youth work in hard times.

Throughout, Ord utilises a detailed analysis of contemporary curriculum policies to support his arguments. He examines how they have developed from the rejection of attempts to form a national youth work curriculum at the ministerial conferences in the early 90s to the aftermath of *Transforming Youth Work* and *Every Child Matters*. This analysis provides an invaluable record of how youth work has responded and evolved in response to constant pressure to prove its worth, and gives a useful insight to anyone involved in curriculum development. Significantly, Ord

recommends that this involvement should go beyond the ‘inner circle’ of curriculum development and involve all staff and service users to ensure that what is created is more than just ‘a document which sits on the shelf until “the inspector calls” ’ (p113).

**Roy Smith is an area manager with Medway Youth Service. His background is in detached youth work.**

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*Gillian Ruch, Danielle Turney and Adrian Ward (eds.)*

**Relationship-based Social Work: getting to the heart of practice**

Jessica Kingsley 2010

ISBN 978-1-84905-003-6

£19.99 (pbk)

pp. 271

Steve Rogowski

**M**ARGARET THATCHER’s general election victory in 1979 saw the end of the acceptance of a robust welfare state and a substantial role for government in economic planning and regulation. Monetarism and eventually neoliberalism was the replacement. As for social workers, the Conservatives viewed them as encouraging welfare dependency, so private sector managerialism was introduced to control what they do and how, as well as to limit public expenditure. New Labour continued with such strategies by introducing ever more bureaucratic, and increasingly electronic, performance indicator hurdles. In so doing, the needs of children and families, along with social work itself, have been subordinated to the needs of managers and their organisations, as a relationship-based service was transformed into a bureaucratic one. Arguably we have witnessed the rise and fall of a profession (Rogowski, 2010). This book is a timely and welcome antidote to the current situation.

The editors and contributors point out that relationship-based practice is at the heart of good social work practice because all social work begins and ends with a human encounter between two or more people. For example, disaffected teenagers can often be hard to reach. I recall a fifteen year old young woman with a disrupted care background having spent time living with both separated parents, as well as extended family and friends’ families. She could be challenging – not going to school, being disruptive when there, often going missing, and engaging in drug and alcohol abuse, on occasions being admitted to hospital as a result. She distrusted social workers saying that this was because as she starts to get to know and trust them, they change or her case is simply closed. She was eloquently making the case for relationship-based practice. As a result, it is important that practitioners persevere, are available, honest and consistent in their dealings with such young people. Admittedly, this can be a difficult task, given managers want to process cases as speedily,



and with as little recourse to the public purse, as possible. But attempts can be made and can also be successful, and in so doing it reinforces the arguments in this book.

After an introduction, the book is divided into three sections. The first has three chapters that look at theoretical foundations including the use of self. Although the approach adopted is rooted in psychodynamic, systemic and attachment theories, a broad and inclusive approach is also advocated including empowerment. The second focuses on practice, having six chapters which cover issues such as building relationships, sustaining them and ending them. I particularly liked those which had an emphasis on working with strong feelings ranging from anger and aggression, through depression and despair, to love and positive feelings in general. And the third section has four chapters looking at issues of training, supervision and organisational and policy contexts. The conclusion draws together the themes, including the important point that social work involves much more than a narrow concern with the current pre-occupation with technical competence; rather there must also be an interest in and ability to work with human relationships. Throughout there are useful illustrative case studies.

As might be indicated by my opening remarks, I particularly enjoyed the chapter by Ruch on the contemporary context of practice, including the section on ‘marketisation, managerialism and the commodification and bureaucratisation of the individual’. This relates to the neoliberal view that emphasises markets, ‘choice’ and minimal state intervention, something that social workers have to struggle against in their daily practice. She rightly refers to the colonisation of professional practice by bureaucracy and managerialism but, like many others, manages to retain a sense of hope. This resonates with the recent work of key social work academics such as Paul Michael Garret, Iain Ferguson and Bill Jordan (cf. Rogowski 2010, ch. 7). Admittedly there was a time, as the book acknowledges, that relationship-based work was critiqued by radical/critical workers as being reactionary, individualistic and apolitical. But such is the state of social work in current neoliberal times, that they now acknowledge the positives to be gained by working in, and with a relationship rather than merely bureaucratically people-processing as speedily as possible, with rationing increasingly scarce resources being the ultimate goal.

In short, I certainly recommend this book especially for those on undergraduate and postgraduate social work courses, as well as experienced social workers and allied professionals. Politicians and managers should also digest the arguments even though it is unlikely to be a welcome read for them.

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Jennifer Hulbert, Kevin J. Wetmore, Robert L. York.

### **Shakespeare and Youth Culture**

Palgrave Macmillan (2006)

ISBN 1-4039-7284-2

£42.50 Hardback

pp.249

Sue Robertson

**T**HIS BOOK is a collaborative project by three American authors; as such it occasionally assumes an understanding of American films and icons that may not be so well known in the UK, although the Simpsons must be nearly as well known as Shakespeare! The authors state that they have a unique perspective as they are fans of the cultural forms that they are engaging with, they ‘critique that which they love’ (p.36) and they are also Shakespeare scholars.

The authors set out to explore the appropriation of Shakespeare by youth culture and also how youth culture has been used to market Shakespeare to a young audience. They examine the points of intersection between the culture of Shakespeare seen as ‘high’ and ‘old’ and youth culture, created by and for youth but also the product of corporate marketing, dating from the 1960s. They suggest that young people today often encounter Shakespeare in school with resistance. Many attempts have been made to make him accessible, some of which are outlined in this book. ‘How do we make it relevant?’ is said to be a question which haunts teachers. One of my favourite *Just William* stories has William arguing with a teacher who suggests that Bacon may have written *Hamlet*; William winds up the teacher by getting his ham and Bacon confused and adding eggs in for good measure! (Crompton, 1932).

The authors outline three key strategies employed for combating the supposed inaccessibility of the texts. These are, firstly, translation – changing the language, such as books which change Shakespeare’s text into ‘plain English’ eg. ‘the question is: is it better to be alive or dead?’ (p. 20) for ‘to be or not to be, that is the question’. English GCSE revision guides do the same thing in this country. Secondly, reduction – cutting down the play and often cutting out minor characters. Finally, reference – referring to quotations, character or plot either directly or indirectly, such as a Simpson’s episode where Crusty the Clown plays Lear or which quotes without acknowledgement:

*Lisa: A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.*

*Bart: Not if you call them stenchblossoms (p.27).*

The book specifically focuses on twentieth century American youth culture; each chapter considers one particular aspect of youth culture and Shakespeare, considering how that aspect intersects with Shakespeare and how the two worlds are translated into each other. Chapter 2 by York discusses

films familiar to British young people and commonly used in school, such as Luhrmann's 1996 film of *Romeo and Juliet*. This is said to make *Romeo and Juliet* accessible without breaking the play. He analyses '10 things I hate about you' which is based on *The Taming of the Shrew* and 'O' based on *Othello*, in great detail. I felt much of this was too detailed for a general audience and I found descriptions of films and which elements were the same as the play, or differed from it, rather tedious. Other chapters look at Shakespeare and popular music and comic book adaptations of Shakespeare, and there is an interesting chapter on the 'Ophelia-ization' of teenage girls in books which couch the problems of teenage girls in terms of Shakespeare's character. Hulbert (Chapter 6) dates this to a best-selling social inquiry report called *Reviving Ophelia* (Pipher, 1994) which exposed the problems of teenage girls, who felt lonely and rejected and hated their bodies.

Much of the discussion suggests that the film, musical or book can be enjoyed in itself without any knowledge of the original play, although the DVD release of the film 'O' based on *Othello* apparently includes a silent adaptation of *Othello* (p.112). However, to understand and laugh at all the references in the Reduced Shakespeare Company play, who perform the 'complete works' in two and a half hours, it helps if you know the plays. The same applies it seems to me to the Simpson's *Hamlet* or the rock opera *Forbidden Planet*, discussed here. A recent book by Rose Tremain (2008) has the main character Lev being given *Hamlet* to read which he finds very difficult but understands enough to be able to relate it to his own life. It helps to understand Lev if you have an understanding of *Hamlet* and that is surely one of the reasons why Shakespeare is so important to us; much of our literature and indeed everyday speech refers to his work.

Looking at this book has made me realise how all pervasive Shakespeare is in our culture. There is a huge Shakespeare industry here and in the States, and has been for many years. One of the chapters in the book looks at model figures that one can buy of Shakespeare. Now plastic, these were made of china in Victorian times. As the authors attest, Shakespeare is always our contemporary.

This is an interesting book which is fun to read. However, the book did make me wonder if we are in danger of dumbing down for young people. I recently saw a school production of *Romeo and Juliet* using the original text which was received very well. Young people need to be exposed to different experiences, taken to see the plays and encouraged to struggle with language they are not used to. Surely we don't want them to grow up saying of Shakespeare 'but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me' (*Julius Caesar* Act 1, Scene 11), even if it is easy to find the quotes online without reading the plays!

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