

IN DEFENCE OF YOUTH WORK

Thirty years ago Youth Work aspired to a special relationship with young people. It wanted to meet young women and men on their terms. It claimed to be 'on their side'. Three decades later Youth Work is close to abandoning this distinctive commitment. Today it accepts the State's terms. It sides with the State's agenda. Perhaps we exaggerate, but a profound change has taken place.

This shift has not happened overnight. Back in the 1980's the Thatcherite effort via the Manpower Services Commission to shift the focus of Youth Work from social education to social and life skills was resisted. In the early 90's attempts to impose a national curriculum on the diverse elements of the Youth Service ground to a halt. However with the accession of New Labour the drive to impose an instrumental framework on Youth Work gathered increasing momentum. With Blair and Brown at the helm youth workers and managers have been coerced and cajoled into embracing the very antithesis of the Youth Work process: predictable and prescribed outcomes. Possessing no vision of a world beyond the present New Labour has been obsessed with the micro-management of problematic, often demonised youth. Yearning for a generation stamped with the State's seal of approval the government has transformed Youth Work into an agency of behavioural modification. It wishes to confine to the scrapbook of history the idea that Youth Work is volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees.

For many within the work this has been a painful period. For many there has seemed to be no alternative to making the best of a bad job. But History is an unruly character. In the space of only a few months everything has been turned upside down. Capitalism is revealed yet again as a system of crisis: 'all that is solid melts into air'. Society is shocked into waking from 'the deep slumber of decided opinion'. The arrogant confidence of those embracing the so-called 'new managerialism', which has so afflicted Youth Work, is severely dented. Against this tumultuous background alternatives across the board are being sought. We believe this is a moment to be seized.

Our contention is that we need to reaffirm our belief in an emancipatory and democratic Youth Work, whose cornerstones are:

- The sanctity of the voluntary principle; the freedom for young people to enter into and withdraw from Youth Work as they so wish.
- A commitment to conversations with young people which start from their concerns and within which both youth worker and young person are educated and out of which opportunities for new learning and experience can be created.
- The importance of association, of fostering supportive relationships, of encouraging the development of autonomous groups and 'the sharing of a common life'.
- A commitment to valuing and attending to the here-and-now of young people's experience rather than just focusing on 'transitions'.
- An insistence upon a democratic practice, within which every effort is made to ensure that young people play the fullest part in making decisions about anything affecting them.
- The continuing necessity of recognising that young people are not a homogeneous group and that issues of class, gender, race, sexuality and disability remain central.
- The essential significance of the youth worker themselves, whose outlook, integrity and autonomy is at the heart of fashioning a serious yet humorous, improvisatory yet rehearsed educational practice with young people.

Such a definition is at odds with much that passes for Youth Work today. But, as we have suggested, this is the time to challenge anew the new managerial attempt to make Youth Work the servant of the Market. To give some examples, we need to question:

- The shift from locally negotiated plans to centrally-defined targets and indicators.
- The growing emphasis on identifying the potentially deviant or dysfunctional young person as the centre of Youth Work's attention.
- The increasing incorporation of youth workers into the surveillance of young people, perceived as a threat to social order.
- The insidious way in which delivering accredited outcomes, even if only on paper, has formalised and thus undermined the importance of relationships in the work.
- The distorting effect of identifying individuals as suitable and urgent cases for treatment and intervention, 'to be worked on rather than worked with'.
- The changing role of the youth worker, from being a social educator to a social entrepreneur, submitting plan after bid after plan, selling both themselves and young people in the market-place.
- And finally, but not exhaustively, the delicate issue of to what extent professionalisation, hand in hand with bureaucratisation, has assisted the suffocating grip of rules and regulations upon the work and played a part in the exclusion of the volunteer, once the lifeblood of the old Youth Service [see Jeffs and Smith 2008: 277-283].

Of course it is easy to spout rhetoric on paper. Doing something solid with this analysis is another matter altogether. This is especially the case, given the very different settings occupied by youth workers today. Without doubt the space to duck and dive, to argue and criticise, varies enormously. Yet this very diversity lends weight to the proposal we would like to make, which is quite simply that we must come together to clarify what is going on in all its manifestations; to understand better how we can support each other in challenging the dire legacy of these neo-liberal years.

If we possess the wit and energy to do so, we will not be alone. Organised, dissident resistance is growing. Adult Education, devastated in the name of vocationalism, is reviving at the grass roots. The Social Work Action Network opposes managerialism and marketisation, the stigmatisation of service users. Closer to home the Federation of Detached Youth Work describes its members as neither social entrepreneurs nor social spies, but democratic educators. The National Coalition for Independent Action campaigns to reassert the autonomy of voluntary groups. The Youth Work unions are having to counter savage attacks, as in Coventry, upon young people's provision and workers' conditions. All such opposition offer the chance to 'join up services' under our own steam, under our control, on our and young people's terms.

If you sympathise with and support the position set out in this Open Letter, we ask you to join with us and sign up to its intent. In doing so, you are not agreeing to some party line. There is so much to think through together. However, in doing so, you are lending your voice to what might be a radical revival of a form of Youth Work that wishes to play its part in the creation of a just, equal and democratic society.

Criticisms welcome, but if you feel able to put your signature to this Open Overture, please inform Tony Taylor <mailto:tonymtaylor@gmail.com>

Reference

Jeffs, A and Smith, M. [2008] 'Valuing Youth Work', *Youth & Policy*, 100:277-302.