

A text for our times

A (partial) review of *Youth Work: Histories, Policy and Contexts* (2015), edited by Graham Bright, published by Palgrave

This piece makes no claim to being a full review of this important book – a welcome and, these days, all too rare addition to the literature on youth work. Doing full justice to (in this case) thirteen papers written by fifteen different contributors on topics ranging from ‘Uniformed Youth Work’, ‘Youth Work and the Church’ and ‘Questioning “Muslim Youth”’ to ‘Relocating Detached Youth Work’, ‘Youth Work in Schools’ and ‘Youth Work in Digital Spaces’ - that, it seems to me, is a hard act to pull off in two-to-three thousand words. What follows therefore are some personal reactions to the first six chapters and the concluding chapter which, taken together, provide a valuable updated and critical overview of youth work’s development. In particular they focus our thinking on the role of the state from tentative beginnings via significant expansion to, now, swift decline; its shifting relationship with the voluntary youth sector; and the wider policy terrain on which youth work is now operating.

Analysing politically?

In offering even this partial review, I need to start with a clarification – or is it a confession? I read nothing about youth work these days without sooner or later finding myself asking: so is this article or paper or book locating its discussion within the policies which frame and so often constrain the practice? Is it, furthermore, confronting the politics of those policies - first recognising and then at least to some degree explicitly seeking to unpick and explain their underpinning values and their inbuilt power relations and dynamics? Or does it duck and dive around these questions by taking as a given – even perhaps as self-evidently benign - the wider contextual and especially structural realities: the sense of entitlement of privileged and powerful interests to determine what should and should not be done, and how; and, defined often by class or gender or race, the greatly narrowed if not actually blocked room for manoeuvre of most other individuals, groups and communities?

The sections of the book reviewed here, I have to say, not only avoid this ducking and diving. Chapter by chapter, they each adopt up-front political perspectives well supported by analysis and evidence, some based on the author’s original research. Graham Bright, the book’s editor, sets the overall tone in the opening paper - on youth work’s emergence as a distinctive way of working with young people. In a chapter tellingly headed ‘Our contemporary need for history’ he for example asserts:

Understanding the heritage of any profession is of key importance to critical reflection, and to shaping the direction of future policy and practice.

- adding that

... youth work is highly susceptible to the changing tides of policy, which increasingly appear to marginalize it in the wake of the neo-liberal drifts.

Importantly, too, he reminds us that;

... the meanings and discourses attached to “youth” are socially constructed and change over time

- with the very notion of adolescence having been constructed at a particular historical moment in response to the changing economic and especially industrial conditions and demands of the later nineteenth century.

Other contributors then consistently reinforce this kind of wider contextualisation. Simon Bradford, in surveying youth work's development over the nearly sixty years up to 1996, in part entitles his chapter 'State beneficence or government control...?'. He then goes on to suggest that

Governmentality designates a political rationality in which power is exercised over social and cultural space to create and sustain order and stability over time.

Tania de St Croix, in her exploration of the impact on youth work of David Cameron's 'Big Society', comments that:

New Labour's brand of neo-liberal youth work was broadly directed towards social control.

Pat Norris and Carole Pugh's chapter on 'Local Authority Youth Work' notes how under the Coalition 'neo-liberal agendas provide an ominous backdrop to the current position'. And in some detail Ilona Buchroth and Marc Husband, in their contribution 'Youth Work in the Voluntary Sector', track how all recent governments have for their own strategic purposes corrupted voluntary organisations' independence by corralling them into something they have rebranded as 'the third sector' – that is, as third in line to the state and the market - while at the same time (like it or not) requiring them to be closely integrated with both. What often also becomes clearer from reading this and other chapters is how the market has in effect now been constructed as 'the first sector' with the state struggling to retain its ranking even as number two.

In his chapter 'In the Service of the State: Youth Work under New Labour', Howard Sercombe spells out some of the values underpinning of all of this. He points for example to New Labour's

... fundamental belief in the efficacy of the market as a way mediating human interactions of any kind, and facilitating the best and most efficient effort (or 'maximising goods') of any kind, including time, emotion, commitment and kindness, as well as objects and commodities'.

He then goes on to pair this neo-liberal stance with what he calls – and what attracts comment in other chapters - its 'methodological' underpinning:

... the application of New Public Management techniques in order to control and govern processes within government and across domains over which the state had substantive control.

In his concluding chapter 'In Search of Soul: Where Now for Youth and Community Work?', Bright seems barely able to conceal his anger with all of this:

Political presumption in pronouncing collective social values is staggering; it conditions by drip-feed narrow and often illiberal views concerning society at large and young people in particular. It says 'our' values are right while assuming they are universally shared. Yet, such attitudes ... are unable to recognise the sheer hypocrisy that these 'values' ... not only reproduce, but also exacerbate structural inequalities, and further impoverish social conditions.

The ups, and especially the downs, of open access youth work

So, if all this helps clarify the overall ideological context and the state policies flowing from it, what are the consequences for youth work practice and in particular the open access model? The trajectory has not of course always been straightforward or without its contradictions. Bradford, for example, reminds us that Albemarle 'marked

out a field of work that it defined as distinctively professional', while Sercombe acknowledges that under New Labour there was 'a significant increase in funding at community level, including for youth work'. Even the Coalition government is recorded by Norris and Pugh as having made some positive gestures through for example

... an expressed commitment ... to finding innovative solutions ... that 'reform how services are delivered locally'

– a concern which has surely merited some open-minded government attention for some time.

For youth work, however, the trouble has been that, far from this attention being open-minded, it has increasingly been shaped by all those self-evidently correct and dominant neo-liberal shibboleths. Indeed, one way of reading these chapters is as the story of how at least in England since 1997, under every government, youth work has taken one heavy policy hit after another. (Though the other UK administrations do get mentions, with Sercombe giving Scotland some specific consideration, the focus of these chapters is overwhelmingly on England).

A key thread running through this story is the growing scepticism in government quarters about both the value of youth work itself and the local authority structures in which it has been lodged since the 1940s. As Sercombe notes, the official distancing emerged early, with junior education minister (and former youth worker) Phil Hope insisting in 2005 that

Youth services in that '60s sense are not part of the agenda and they've been proved not to work.

Sercombe then tracks how New Labour policies steadily marginalised open access youth work and weakened local authority Youth Services, initially through the half-cock creation of a Connexions Service which, he suggests, to youth workers 'felt ... like a hostile takeover of the Youth Service'.

Though Sercombe does not touch on this, New Labour subsequently redoubled its efforts to, as it saw it, prise youth workers out of their 'silos' by 'integrating' them into generic ('joined up' and 'seamless') local authority 'children services' – services which, though usually intended for up to 16 year olds, often omitted 'youth' or 'young people' from their titles. Here as in many other areas New Labour thus laid the ground for future Coalition policies and in particular for 'integrated youth support services' obsessed with the targeted forms of provision which have systematically edged out open access youth work. The result, vividly captured by Norris and Pugh, was

... a shift away from voluntary participation towards coercion, from education to case management, and from informal to formal bureaucratic relationships.

No less significant and at least implicit in much that both de St Croix and Buchroth and Husband say in their chapters, these 'radical 'departures from past practice were in effect repeatedly treated as simply youth work by another name, including by key national spokespeople who should surely have known better. Indeed here again Bright, in his concluding chapter, pulls no punches:

Of late... the profession ... has shamefully become a poodle of the state, becoming only too willing to do the bidding of its market-driven masters in exchange for scraps under the table.

Measurement, measurement, measurement...

The chapters under review also allow us to track another key closely related development which for open access provision had no less debilitating consequences: the imposition of pre-set targets, 'metric' evaluations and requirements for other forms of demonstrable 'impact'. As Sercombe explains, youth work practice has always been centred on

The quality of relationships between the young person and the youth worker ... (it) did not lend itself easily to measurement and so did not generate the kind of data funding bodies were looking for.

The result under New Labour was the imposition of what Sercombe calls

... a range of proxies for youth work's actual achievements: improved school attendance, college enrolment, decreases in offending, securing employment;

According to de St Croix, by the time we get to the Coalition years, measurement and reward were also being demanded 'on the basis of monetized outcomes' – a highly questionable procedure which, as she also makes clear in her chapter, has dominated all the evaluations of the National Citizens Service.

Good-bye to the local authority Youth Service?

Profiling these developments in these ways is much needed. With open access youth work's widespread demise so often being explained solely in terms of 'the cuts', these wider – and crucial – ideological and managerial dimensions of what is happening can too easily get sidelined. However these financial realities and their consequences do of course need to be logged - not least because the huge reductions in central government grants to local authorities have resulted in one Youth Service after another being closed down, leaving a gaping 'delivery' hole in the state's commitment to directly providing or even supporting youth work.

This too has a back story: under the 'integration' pressures discussed above, Sercombe for example concludes that under New Labour

... even with increased resources, the Youth Service in England continued to decline through the first decade of the twenty-first century

Norris and Pugh then confront the issue head-on in their chapter on the Coalition period, in a section entitled 'Is There Still Space for Youth Work within Local Authority Provision?' And Bright, probing deeper, explores how we can re-create this space so that, rather than allowing the state to remain, as he calls it, 'the principal stakeholder', we start from the assumption that '(t)his power balance needs to be redressed', particularly, he emphasises, in favour of young people.

Overall, then, the chapters of the book considered here provide a searching record of the development over the past seventy years of a distinctive educational practice with young people and, deeply interlinked, of the statutory Youth Service in which substantial amounts of it have been hosted. In reading them I encountered some minor moments of irritation – like: are all those references in the text really needed? These however were for me more than balanced by the 'Over to you' boxes which feature in all the chapters with questions and suggested follow-up tasks as stimulus for readers to reflect (and indeed self-reflect) on what they have just read and its practical implications for them.

Ways forward?

Given the present situation, many of the messages emerging from these chapters are pretty negative. De St Croix for example concludes with a warning that

... many established youth services and voluntary sector organisations have been lost or changed beyond recognition, and the struggles will continue over whether youth work can, or should, be governed according to market values.

Buchroth and Husband, in giving the 'voice' of young people a sharp focus in their discussion of the voluntary sector, point to policy starting points which present the young as 'passively disengaged' if not as actual problems – a position underlined by Bright when he suggests that :

Voices of young people, it would appear, have been marginalized or, at least, managed in a way that is socially and politically expedient.

And yet, notwithstanding pessimistic conclusions like these, and despite in particular the pounding of open access youth work in England and of local authority Services which these chapters record, some messages of hope and (albeit tentatively) of constructive ways forward are also on offer. Thus Sercombe notes that

In Scotland and Wales, at least, governments continue to affirm the value of youth work and its place in their plans.

He also reminds us that

... youth work has maintained a continuous active presence in the United Kingdom and in other industrialized countries for the last 150 years, because the dynamics of modernity make it socially necessary. These dynamics are intensifying, rather than abating, so there is no doubt that there is a future for youth work.

Norris and Pugh make the, for them, ironic but still very challenging point that:

... the current paucity of resources may provide the freedom to approach issues creatively and from new angles. The silent ambivalence within central policy frameworks may yet engineer local conditions for innovation and creativity.

For doing this, Buchroth and Husband urge us to address the issue of

... how we can use our skills and experience of resisting dominant discourses and empowering youth work practice to collectivize and voice the compromised positions in which voluntary organisations (?and others) find themselves.

And in his concluding chapter - necessarily cautiously but seemingly in contradiction of his earlier point about young people's marginalization - Bright points to how:

To some extent young people have become re-politicized, campaigning against the loss of the Education Maintenance Allowance and the hike in university tuition fees.

Given these much-needed attempts to address the question: 'So - what are we supposed to do on Monday morning?', of special interest to me was Bright's reference in this same chapter to Tom Wiley's exploration in an article published in 2010 of what he called 'the three traditions of advocacy for youth work' and in particular of 'principled pragmatism'¹. Bright, it would seem, has little patience with this notion, pointing out that 'the pragmatic approach ... potentially does little to reclaim lost territory, renew democracy or renegotiate a new civility'. In pursuing important goals like these, it is certainly true that pragmatism on its own can not only be unhelpful. It can actually turn out to be counter-productive, especially when equal emphasis isn't given to some clearly articulated principled starting points and bottom lines. Nonetheless, as someone who was floating the possible usefulness of the approach at least as far back as 2005, I

¹ Wiley, T, 2010, 'Youth Work in a Cold Climate', *Youth and Policy*, 105, pp 1-8

less inclined to dismiss it too easily. Indeed, while acknowledging still that ‘... “principled pragmatism” can feel very compromised and compromising’, I would argue now, as I did in 2005, that:

It is not be devalued ... least of all by those of us who now sit a long way from the action. Often indeed it is the best, and on the ground the only, form of manoeuvring available to workers and managers committed to the best young person-centred practice they can achieve in unsympathetic or even hostile environments’.¹

And why, still, do I hold to this view? Because at a time when despondency rides high within the youth work field, often leaving only inaction in its wake, we surely need to be searching for even modest ways to ‘live the future now’² – that is,

... to prefigure a practice which (is) a little more congruent with a society organized on entirely different economic and political principles’.³

These chapters don’t (of course) provide any blueprints for doing this. They do however confront us with the inescapable need for an honest and hard-headed analysis of what we’re up against today – ideologically, economically, politically. More positively, they also remind us of youth work’s deep roots, within but especially without the state. And they offer some albeit modest but grounded encouragement to continue the fight for a practice which for many young people is at its best not so much ‘preventative’ or ‘restorative’ but a rare and even unexpected route into something less patronising and more respectful – an accessible yet challenging form of informal education.

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¹ Davies, B. 2005, ‘Threatening Youth revisited: youth policies under New Labour’, *the encyclopaedia of informal education*, www.infed.org/archives/bernard_davies/revisiting_threatening_youth.htm

² Galper, J. 1973, ‘Personal politics and psychoanalysis’, *Social Policy (USA)*, 4, November/December, pp 35-43

³ Davies, B. 1986: *Threatening Youth: Towards a national youth policy*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press. p 135