

‘Open’ youth work in 2019: a backward look

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Introduction

This article makes no claim to providing a definitive response to its title. Indeed, what follows is often speculative, particularly in its re-examination of the periods of youth work’s history it covers. Its main aim is to offer critical analysis and comment, not least as a possible prompt for identifying messages from that history which might be relevant to the current struggles to sustain and reinstate ‘open’ youth work in England and perhaps beyond.

‘Open’ youth work: towards a definition

In England at least we are at a point in that history when both statutory and voluntary sector policy-makers now often label almost any kind of work with young people ‘youth work’. It seems essential therefore to start by clarifying how the term is understood and used in this article. Its description as ‘open’ is intended to highlight two of the practice’s key distinctive features: the openness of the settings in which it is offered to any young person who chooses to attend voluntarily; and its openness to ‘outcomes’ defined by *those* young people, by their concerns and their interests. It also assumes throughout the other ‘cornerstones’ proposed in the 2009 *In Defence of Youth Work*’s Open letter (IDYW, 2009) - that youth work:

- offers informal, personally developmental educational opportunities;
- works with and through young people’s peer networks and other shared identities of, for

example, class, gender, ethnicity, (dis)ability and sexual orientation;

- gives value and attention to their here-and-now as well as to their ‘transitions’; and
- seeks to develop mutually respectful and trusting personal relationships - amongst young people and between young person and adult.

In 2019 there remains one key rationale for holding to this definition: the evidence that, while they were still widely available, settings offering this practice were being used by significant proportions of the relevant age group. For example, even three years into the ‘austerity’ decimation of England’s local authority Youth Services set out below, a National Council for Voluntary Youth Services report was indicating that over 30% of 10-15 year olds - that is, anything up to one million young people - said they were attending a ‘youth club’ once or most days a week (NCVYS, 2013: 2).

Youth work in 2019: two contradictory narratives

However, unless this provision met the wider youth policy aims of our most powerful state policy-makers, this evidence seems barely to have counted. For, example, Boris Johnson, when he was Mayor of London, stated support for uniformed groups was justified because, he said, they ‘... help equip [young people] with the skills they need to succeed in life ... by instilling self-reliance, discipline and a sense of competition...’ (Lepper, 2012). In the years running up to 2019, Government ministers from the Prime Minister down made it clear, too, through action and inaction, that the youth club model of youth work, at least as provided through English local authority Youth Services, was not to be trusted to meet these societal requirements.

Research by the trade union Unison thus revealed that between 2010-11 and 2018-19 these Services’ budgets across the UK were cut by £400 million, over 4,500 youth work jobs were lost, 763 youth centres closed and, by 2016, nearly 140,000 ‘young people places’ removed (Unison, 2016; 2018). The resultant deconstruction of local authority Services across England were subsequently confirmed by reports from two All Party Parliamentary Groups of MPs (APPG, 2019; Booth, 2019; Jacobs, 2019A) and a House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee (2019).

According to the government’s own figures, by as early as 2013-14 the balance of local

authorities' 'youth services' budgets had thus tipped significantly towards 'targeted' programmes, with the proportion spent on 'universal' provision falling from 55.25% to 47.5%. (McCardle, 2014). Between 2011-12 and 2017-18, Essex – once a pioneer in Youth Service development – recorded a £0 spend on 'universal' (that is 'open') services for an 11-19 year olds population of 150,000 (APPG, 2019: 39). And, even as ministers were claiming from 2018 on that austerity was over, Derbyshire was in 2019-20 planning to remove all funding for 'generic youth activity clubs' (Derbyshire Council Council, 2019).

Moreover, in the same years that major budget cuts were 'unavoidably' being imposed on public services, government departments were still managing to find amounts of money for favoured youth organisations which far exceeded what was being taken away from local authority Youth Services.

- Between 2012-13 and 2017-18, as well as some £179 million already being provided by the Ministry of Defence, the armed services' cadet forces shared an additional approximately £70 million of government funding with the Scouts, the Guides, the various Brigades and other uniformed organisations.
- Within three months of its creation by the government in 2013, Step Up To Serve was making the first of many grants - £11 million to 41 organisations - to support 'safe' forms of 'youth volunteering' rebadged as 'social action'.
- According to the government's own figures, between 2014-15 and 2017-18, 94% - some £634 million - of its funding for 'youth services' went to the National Citizens Service (NCS) (Puffett, 2018) even though in that period it recruited only 12% of its 15-17 year old target group (Booth, 2018).

Cuts: so – what's new?

Two quotations from the late 1950s illustrate that, where local authority youth work in England is

today, it has been before.

Fred Bush (1957) President of the National Association of Youth Leaders and Organisers:

2,000 in 1951 – 700 in 1957. These figures represent the estimated number of full-time leaders in the country...When one ... learns of the apathy and lack of interest which emanates from the administrators it is surprising to find that there are even 700 full-time leaders left

Sir Gilbert Fleming, Permanent Parliamentary Secretary of Education: evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on Estimates (1958):

It is certainly true that, amongst the many services which might be further expanded and developed in order that all possibilities open to an education ministry are fully carried out, the Youth Service is one which it has been definite policy for some time now not to advance. There is no quarrelling with that at all.

The promise of social democracy

Why did this earlier rundown happen, what prompted an eventual recovery and - perhaps most significantly - why has this not been sustained over the following decades?

Tony Jeffs, writing in 1979, pointed to a missed opportunity in the 1950s 'to construct a real partnership between the voluntary and statutory sectors'. As a result, he concluded, Youth Service provision from then on 'depended increasingly upon the willingness of central and local government to lend both moral and financial support' (Jeffs, 1979). Yet the legislation which had purportedly made such support statutory - the 1944 Education Act - named neither youth work nor the Youth Service. Relying instead on vague phrases such as offering 'leisure time occupation ... for any person over compulsory school age', it thus left both the practice and the providing state structures weakly embedded in the post-1945 welfare state.

The Services in England and Wales can now be seen to have come closer to gaining that status as a result of the recommendations of the Albemarle report, published in 1960 (Ministry of

Education, 1960). These included a ten-year development programme for the Service; ‘a generous and imaginative building programme’; an increase in the trained full-time workforce within five years from 700 to 1300; a national committee to negotiate these workers’ salaries and conditions of service; and, to advise the government, a Youth Service Development Council (YSDC). Moreover, not only did the then Conservative government accept all the Report’s proposals on the day it appeared. By the time it lost power in 1964 all of them had been implemented, with the Minister of Education himself by then chairing the YSDC.

No less significant was the Report’s often nuanced commentary on the kind of practice needed to be effective with young people. This started by asserting that their ‘voluntary attendance is important’ not least because, in contrast to attending school, ‘it introduces adult freedom and choice’. More controversially, particularly perhaps for many in those sections of the voluntary sector which recent governments have favoured, the Report concluded that terms such as “service”, “dedication”, “leadership” and “character-building”, though still being used ‘as though they were a commonly accepted and valid currency’ ... do not seem to “speak to their [young people’s] condition”. This, the report made clear, did not mean that youth workers should adopt ‘an abdicating assimilation to the adolescent’s view of the world’. It did though point to a practice which was ‘peculiarly challenging because it requires a tense day-to-day walking on a razor-edge between sympathy and surrender’.

Both Albemarle’s actual recommendations, the depth of its analysis and its subsequent impact have often been attributed to the influence of key Committee members. Lady Albemarle herself, for example, was at the time described as ‘a professional’ who ‘devotes her energy to working the machinery by which public services of all kinds are performed’. (*The Observer*, 1960). It was she, apparently, who proposed Richard Hoggart as a Committee member (Hoggart, 1992) after reading his *Uses of Literacy* – a classic text of the period which full frontally confronted the sensitive class and wider challenges posed by the newly-emerging mass consumer society (Hoggart, 1957). Important inputs clearly came, too, from Leslie Paul, a founder of the left-leaning Woodcraft Folk who co-drafted the report with Hoggart and no doubt also from Pearl Jephcott who had been researching and writing about young women and youth work since the early 1940s.

In explaining Albemarle’s substantial and immediate impacts, what more importantly has to be

acknowledged is that it was to a significant extent the product of a social democratic period which assumed that the state, national and local, should – indeed, often must – play a central role in shaping, funding and providing services which, at least implicitly, were understood as a citizen’s right.

... and its limitations

Looking back from 2019 with the wisdom of hindsight, however, the report itself and the process of producing it carried some cautions. For example, rather than focusing on the personally developmental aims which many youth workers even then claimed to prioritise, Albemarle’s government-defined terms of reference required it first to clarify the Youth Service’s possible contribution to ‘... assisting young people to play their part in the life of their community’. It was specifically told, too, to take into account ‘current trends in other branches of the education service’: an echo perhaps of policy-makers’ doubts at the time about whether local authority Youth Services would still be needed after 1963 when the school-leaving age was to be raised to 16; and - as was also planned - once part-time further education had been made compulsory for all 17 and 18 year olds via a national network of ‘county colleges’. By reminding the Committee ‘to advise according to what priorities best value can be obtained for the money spent’, Ministers - in terms still resonant in 2019 - clearly sought also to set some financial boundaries for its proposals.

The inclusion in the Committee’s brief of a reference to ‘changing social and industrial conditions’ indicated an expectation, too, that it address wider perceived threats to the social order, not least from young people themselves. These, explicitly examined in sub-sections of the report, included a predicted ‘bulge’ in the 15-20 year old population from 2.5 million in 1950 to 4.3 million in 1966; rising levels of juvenile delinquency; the ‘potential strains’ resulting from the ‘changing pattern of women’s lives’; and the phasing-out by 1963 of national military service - widely if not always accurately seen as a vital disciplining experience for young men. The Committee was clear too that, even allowing for ‘regional and occupational differences’, the Youth Service could not ignore young people’s ‘new spending power’, the ‘consumption for pleasure’ this was encouraging and concerns that this new teenage generation – ‘the litmus test of a society’ – was ‘increasingly materialistic; “couldn’t care less”; and ‘have no moral values’.

Even allowing for Albemarle’s sophisticated negotiation of these parameters and the major advances for youth work it made possible, were we subsequently, perhaps, too optimistic, even

complacent, about the depths of the roots of this social democratic moment in youth work's history?

Beyond Albemarle – and social democracy

After ten months of silence, the then Education Secretary – one Margaret Thatcher – shelved the next major report on the Service by the Fairbairn-Milson Committee (Department of Education and Science, 1969) because, she said, she was unwilling 'to change the nature of the service ... radically by setting up a youth and community service'. Though some local authorities, by adding 'community' to the title of their Services, did save its proposals from disappearing without trace, evidence is scarce on the impacts these had on actual practice or provision.

By then, however, the fault lines within the social democratic commitment to the Albemarle conception of youth work were beginning to be exposed. Even as she was rejecting the Fairbairn-Milson report, Thatcher for example ruled that local authorities should target their youth work provision on young people living in areas of 'high social need'. By then, too, broader anti-statist ideas were penetrating policy makers' thinking, as evidenced from the later 1960s on, particularly within education, by a series of 'Black Papers'.

These shifts coincided with – indeed were given strong impetus by – deep cuts in public expenditure which followed that period's own major financial crisis and recession in 1973-75. One result was an extension of the targeting approach within youth services in order to deal with rising levels of youth unemployment. Over the decade and into the 1980s youth work's personally educational practice was thus further side-lined as government policies focused on ensuring that young people were equipped with the 'social and life skills' seen as needed to get and hold a job. In 1982, in its response to the next Youth Service review, the Thompson Report (1982), the Thatcher government thus ruled that local authorities were to concentrate on the young unemployed by 'incorporating the Service's resources and skills into the (Manpower Services Commission's) Youth Training Scheme'. More broadly, local authorities were also told that they must 'appraise carefully their funding for the statutory youth service relative to other claims on their total expenditure'.

In order to concentrate local Youth Services even more sharply on the most socially needy young

people, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, via a series of ‘Ministerial Conferences’, the government was pressing the youth work field to develop its own ‘core curriculum’ – a move seen by one commentator at the time as ‘a bizarre extension of Whitehall rule’. Another review of the Service – significantly, carried out this time by a leading private business consultancy, Coopers and Lybrand Deloitte (1991) – did offer a defence of youth work’s informal education tradition. However, its report not only failed to acknowledge the bottom-up push for recognition of the innovative youth work then going on with young women, Black and gay, lesbian and bisexual young people. It also injected into the youth work/Youth Service discourse what were to become familiar neo-liberal notions of business plans, resource models and performance indicators.

By 2005, without consultation or debate, youth workers were being told by a Labour government Minister with the title ‘Children, Young People and Families’ that in the future their practice was to be ‘... primarily ... about activities rather than informal education’. This injunction came also with the inescapable New Labour riders that these ‘positive activities’ must be targeted primarily on those labelled ‘vulnerable’, ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘at risk’ and that ‘hard’ measures for assessing ‘value for money’ must be applied.

Though the New Labour policies did bring extra resources, ideologically the ground was thus well laid for that reconceptualisation of youth work by post-2010 governments as any form of work with young people whose primary rationale was to reach and re-socialise relatively small and pre-labelled sections of the youth population with ‘outcomes’ pre-determined from above.

Reinstating youth work: top-down or bottom-up?

One of the Theresa May government’s few gestures to tackling this marginalisation of the ‘open’ model of youth work was, in April 2019, to propose a Youth Charter ‘to develop a vision for young people over the next generation and beyond’. At the same time a review of the statutory guidance on local authority Youth Services was promised which was being implemented in the late summer and early autumn through a series of National Youth Agency ‘roadshows’ and a government consultation-by-questionnaire.

Given the admission by over half of 97 local authorities as far back as 2014 that they were at best only partly fulfilling their legal duty in relation to Youth Service provision (McCardle, 2014), these

initiatives were clearly needed. However, as this is being written in September 2019, it is very far from clear how or even if a populist law-and-order Johnson administration will follow through on these commitments. More fundamentally, throughout the history briefly outlined in this article, the problem for open youth work anyway has not just been the looseness of the phrasing of statutory guidance which has given local authorities ample room to cut their Youth Services when the financial pressures are on. Much deeper systemic shortcomings have existed within their top-down and bureaucratic decision-making and managerial structures and procedures which, increasingly post-Albemarle, were experienced by youth workers as insufficiently flexible to accommodate their ‘on the wing’ practice. (HMI, 1987).

Though they come with some major cautions, the MPs’ reports referred to earlier do offer some positive possibilities for moving forward. So, too, does the Labour Party’s ‘National Strategy for Youth Work’ with its proposals for ring-fenced funding for local Youth Services and for ‘strategic leadership’ by local authorities to be implemented through ‘local youth service partnerships with young people, parents, professionals and councillors’. (Labour Party, 2018; Jacobs, 2019B).

However, given some of the lessons emerging from the Youth Service’s more recent history in England, including during its brief period of social democratic endorsement, much more fundamental shifts in thinking and action will be needed if such partnerships are to work. Above all, underpinned by the wider commitments of some more progressive councils to, for example, ‘community wealth building’, ‘social value’ and ‘mutual self-help’ in running services (see for example O’Neill, 2016; Baird, 2017), local state providers will need also to be much more open to sharing their power with other key stakeholders and much more flexible in how they allocate and evaluate the use of the available resources.

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