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Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

Ian Fyfe & Stuart Moir

Introduction

The collection of papers in this reader straddle a period of significant political change. The first decade of the twentieth century will inevitably be synonymous with the ongoing global economic crisis. In this opening paper we map out the journey ahead for youth work with a glance back over some key markers of the past decade that have shaped the priorities for contemporary practice. Symbolically, youth work appears to be a crossroads - looking to the past for inspiration in order to make better sense of the current context and ultimately gauge the best way forward. There are choices, albeit limited, about which direction to take. The available routes ahead are significantly shaped by the political and policy imperatives of government. Metaphorically, reliance on a 'GPS' to inform the future journey for youth work is likely to be locked into the priorities of the state; subsequently the directions for practice are predetermined. We conclude that the future challenges for youth work practitioners include a need to critically take stock of the ever-changing context in order to assist in taking the best steps forward.

The Scottish Context – Looking back

The election of the UK New Labour government in 1997 paved the way for a programme of constitutional reform ultimately leading to the reestablishment of a Scottish Parliament in May 1999, the first for almost 300 years. The resultant devolution of power from the UK Westminster government realigned responsibility for key policy areas affecting children and young people to the Scottish Parliament. The subsequent implementation of state-sponsored services targeted at young people was steered by the three discrete policy themes of lifelong learning, social inclusion and active citizenship, the pillars of the new Labour vision for Scotland (Scottish Office 1998).

The historical period covered by this reader is generally referred to in the British context as the 'New Labour' years (Banks 2010). The political rhetoric of the respective UK governments and in post-devolution Scotland has shifted inevitably. Yet, for some

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commentators the ideological thread of neo-liberlism has weaved through the various political machinations providing an ideological link between the changing administrations (Davidson, McCafferty, & Miller 2010). In essence, we have experienced a distinct political era characterised by regimes that span a left-right ideological spectrum and form 'part of the broader international hegemony of neo-liberalism' (Simmons & Thompson 2011, p.4). Such a trend has been evident across many western democracies.

The political configuration of the Scottish Government[1] has changed through the post-devolution elections held respectively in 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011. However, it is not the intention here to elucidate in detail the specific changing political climate in Scotland. By way of a summary, the first two post-devolution elections resulted in a coalition between the Labour and Liberal Democrat Parties in control of the Scottish Executive. Power shifted in 2007 with the Scottish National Party forming a minority government. Their position of influence was consolidated in 2011 when the electorate returned them to power, on this occasion with a clear majority.

Whilst the underlying political project of new Labour was generally welcomed across the UK in the late 1990s, significant changes in the perceived priorities for youth work provoked new tensions. Shifting emphasis highlighted an apparent imbalance of resource-driven intervention directed at addressing specific 'youth issues', such as risk-taking behaviour, employability (unemployment) and community safety. Consequently, concern with each of these broad jurisdictions for practice was fuelled by an underlying deficit discourse; blame was commonly apportioned to the lives and lifestyles of the youth of the time.

Since devolution in 1999, the relationship between young Scots and the policy agenda targeted at them has at times been confusing and contradictory. Generally, the public image of young people has become poor, generating new pressures on youth workers to respond to the alleged growing youth problem. Despite the visionary policy rhetoric that proclaimed the emergence of a 'new' Scotland 'where everyone matters' (Scottish Executive 1999), young people have all too often been portrayed in public discourse as victims of a perceived

[1] The name Scottish Government was adopted from 2007 onwards, previous post-devolution administrations operated under the title of the Scottish Executive.

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generational slide towards political apathy, social exclusion, poor health, criminality and welfare dependency resulting from long term unemployment.

Historically, youth work has responded in principle to the expressed needs of young people; as Wylie argues 'at its best, youth work has been a service driven by local imperatives' (2010, p.7). Practitioners often lay claim to having the creative capacity to hone their methods and approaches to engage meaningfully with the changing lives and lifestyles of the younger generation. In recent times, the unrelenting drive of policy has taken hold with the result that the sector, from community level up to strategic management has 'been too ready to take on the jargon of funding bodies' (Davies 2011, p.25). The homogenised labelling of young people is nothing new, but current practice initiatives also appear to be increasingly locked into the language and outcome-driven priorities of policy.

The past decade has been characterised by an emerging paradox between a desire to build the democratic capacity of our young citizens to take more control of their lives, alongside an ever-increasing expectation that modes of youth work practice can and should control their perceived deviant behaviour (Barry 2005). This conflicting vision has become all too pervasive and succinctly captured by Bradford (2004) who observed:

> Youth work has been increasingly drawn into initiatives explicitly designed to manage specific groups of young people, particularly those thought to be 'at risk' of involvement in criminal activity…..Youth work's history is predicated on the idea that young people (*qua* adolescents) are *essentially* vulnerable (and thus at risk). Young people are likely to remain a source of political and social concern, and no doubt new aspects of youth risk wait to be revealed or constructed. Youth work, in one form or another, will continue to offer a flexible means of contributing to the governance of young people (p. 252).

It is within this contested policy terrain that youth work has been positioned, resulting in shifting priorities for the practitioner, allied with competing demands on resources.

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For many governments, austerity measures have become necessary to ensure efficiency of public spending within diminished budgets. In funding terms 'things have got a little less flexible over the last decade or so' with governments becoming 'more adept at managing community organisations' (Sercombe 2010, p.79). Added to the bureaucratic mechanisms of government, youth work services and agencies are also faced with external inspection of the outcomes of their work.

The financial resources available for youth work have become highly competitive, with dwindling funds available to the respective state-sponsored and third sectors. This, in turn, has impacted directly on the role and purpose of the youth work practitioner. For Wylie (2010), the contemporary economic and political landscape is 'chilling', with youth work operating within a context dominated by neo-liberal notions of market competitiveness (p.7). More and more we witness the goals of practice shaded by dedicated funding streams frequently at odds with the real needs of young people living in local neighbourhoods. For many youth-oriented services, competitive bidding for dedicated funding has become the norm, shaping practice priorities set against predetermined outcomes; often with tokenistic or indeed no consideration of the views of young people themselves. Whilst youth work practitioners find themselves in direct competition for funds, the common expectation is they also work together in partnership.

Increasingly, youth workers are engaged in a multi-disciplinary field of practice occupied by a diverse range of professional colleagues with whom they are strongly encouraged to form alliances and plan shared goals. Indeed, the integration and co-location of youth services is now a commonplace scenario and an overriding feature of the Scottish policy context (for example Scottish Government 2009 & 2012a). Across Scotland, the once-discrete profession of Community Education, of which youth work was a core domain of practice, has become subsumed within a diverse range of local government departments and subsequently marketed by the Scottish Government more as an 'approach' to service delivery (Scottish Executive 2003).

Essentially, the longstanding principles, traditions and characteristics that typify youth work in Scotland (and beyond) have been embraced by a diversity of professional colleagues in

other practice areas such as social work, leisure, recreation, health promotion and law enforcement. The impact of this context on the collection of voluntary, faith-based and uniformed organisations that make up the Third Sector will undoubtedly have a far-reaching and devastating effect on the long-term stability of discrete local youth work services and projects.

Jeffs (2011) suggests we are witnessing a post-statutory era in terms of the make up of the broader youth work sector, evidenced in some parts of the UK amongst other things by the growth of youth workers employed by faith-based organisations. A sole reliance on state funding now seems an unrealistic prospect, particularly in the Third Sector. It would appear then that, alongside a genuine desire for the integration of services across sectors and between discrete professional disciplines, there is increased competition in bidding for limited funding and inevitable caveats applied to outcomes.

Against the backdrop of an emerging economic crisis over the past decade, there has been mounting emphasis on the measurement of the outcomes of youth work practice, and the perceived impact of discrete services on the lives and lifestyles of young people. For Ord (2007):

> Clarity about the outcomes and the educational achievements of youth work is enormously beneficial…Evaluation is integral and a critical perspective on the effectiveness of our interventions is crucial in the development of good practice (p.30).

The implementation of evaluative frameworks has become associated with a rise in perceived managerialist approaches to decision-making and resource allocation, described by Rose (2010) as an 'accountability model' (p.156). As a consequence, evaluation of the outcomes of youth work approaches has become an often-confusing and multifaceted activity that is characterised by a range of contrasting perceptions and purposes that tend to rely heavily on a technocratic systems approach (Subrha, 2007). For Ord (2007) youth work is a qualitative process and the application of crude calculations of efficiency based on inputs and outputs is problematic and 'does not allow for the subtlety of the process' (p.81).

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That said, the systematic introduction of approaches to measurement has given much-needed legitimacy to established, yet unheralded, aspects of youth work practice. A case in point is the current emphasis on post-school transitional destinations; supporting young people's development towards adulthood being a long-standing feature of youth work practice. Furthermore, the thrust for integration and joined-up working highlights the benefits of a common approach to measurement that acknowledges the discrete contribution of youth work whilst removing any ambiguity over the collective desired outcome. However, Morgan (2009) highlights some potential pitfalls and offers further insight to the marginal role of young people in shaping services:

> Outcomes may, in the short-term, drive the development of more targeted approaches to youth work but appear to be focussed on human and economic capital at the expense of social capital. The real needs of young people are often not at the centre of the policies as they continue to be viewed as recipients of programmes that are shaped 'for' them not 'by' them (p.62).

As a core feature of developments over the past decade, the predominance of pre-set targets appear in the main to be concerned with accountability and the efficient delivery of political imperatives; in other words, an approach to measurement geared towards a market-orientated mode of practice. Hence, the notion of a proactive and flexible approach to youth work – the old adage of starting where young people are at - appears to have become sidelined in favour of a compromised deference to and uncritical implementation of particular policy themes.

Taking Stock of the current context – Are we there yet?

Despite the socioeconomic changes of the past decade, the long-standing 'traditions' and values of youth work continue to feature strongly in contemporary policy literature *and* academic commentary. The Scottish Executive (2007) acknowledges that the overriding purpose of youth work is:

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> To promote achievement by young people through facilitating their personal, social and educational development and enabling them to gain a voice, influence and place in society (p.12).

In definitional terms at least, youth work in Scotland is still above all concerned with the social, personal and political development of young people. The antecedents of contemporary practice continue to hold leverage in determining the overall purpose of youth work. The *Statement on the Nature and Purpose of Youth Work* published by Youthlink Scotland (2009) refreshed some long-standing principles of youth work: young people choosing to participate; the work must build from the interests and experiences of young people; recognising the young person and the youth worker as partners in a learning process. More recently, a call was made on the Scottish Government to give greater recognition to the impact of youth work in terms of positive outcomes for young people, delivery of core policy imperatives and the social return on investment in services (Youthlink Scotland 2011).

Moreover, significant progress has been made in terms of cementing the professional identity of the youth work practitioner in the broader field of youth service providers. Greater consideration has been given to the ethical dimensions of youth work practice with a flurry of publications (for example Banks 2011 & Sercombe 2011). Contemporary response to this important aspect of practice is further evidenced in the publication of a code of ethics for Community Learning and Development workers in Scotland, with an emphasis on youth work practice (CLD Standards Council 2011). Workforce development has also become a feature of the youth work sector typified by the delivery across many local communities of a *Professional Development Award in Youth Work*, an accredited training programme targeted at volunteer and part-time youth workers (SQA 2012). The sector in Scotland appears to be on the offensive in relation to the long-term future and security of youth work services through establishment of a national introductory-level training programme and enhancing the professional profile and approach of practitioners.

This is not to suggest a *fait accompli* for the practice profile of the modern-day youth worker; or alternatively that complacency is an option. Batsleer (2010) contends that contemporary youth work:

> occupies an ambivalent space; on the one hand appearing to be under threat and on the other hand being valued and in demand, on condition that it constantly reinvents itself (p.153).

A timely reminder of the dynamic agency of the youth work practitioner is set out by Coburn (2010) who states that youth work is a 'negotiated venture, involving young people and youth workers in collaboration to develop the work they do together' (p. 35). The primary goal in this collaborative endeavour is to strike a balance between the political priorities enshrined in policy and the educational possibilities of practice in meeting the needs of young people. Perhaps an ongoing objective is to tip the balance in favour of practice that more effectively responds to the needs and aspirations of young people. The resultant markers of 'good practice' could provide more meaningful alternatives to those based merely on technocratic measurement regimes applied to outcomes relating to political imperatives. Returning to our metaphor, it is essential that the youth work road map shows the minor roads to change as well as the major motorways!

The ongoing need for reinvention and repositioning of youth work is also influenced by the changing social conditions affecting young people. As is the case in similar advanced democracies, the spectre of unemployment hangs over the current generation of young Scots. The transition between the perceived status of youth and adult is atypically characterised for many young people by protracted and broken pathways between education, training and insecure employment. There is a genuine concern for the future of today's youth related to a fear of the potentially lasting effects of negative destinations faced in the course of the transitional experience. Clearly, youth work has a key role to play in supporting successful navigation towards independent adulthood, regardless of how we determine positive destinations in the future.

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Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

A consistent criticism aimed at young people over the past decade has been their apparent disengagement from the institutions and processes of politics. Whilst the rhetoric of youth participation has given way to broader policy notions of community engagement, a desire to nurture the agency of young people through testing their opinion on services, supporting their involved in local decision-making, governance and action persists (Fyfe 2010). The impending referendum on the constitutional future of Scotland (Scottish Government 2012b) directly raises questions about the role of young Scots in democratic participation offering up a rich arena for youth work to nurture political literacy and action amongst the next generation of voters. In itself the debate around the voting age provides exciting new terrain for informal educational work.

The Future of Youth Work - Going in the right direction?

Youth work in Scotland and farther a field is at a crossroads. Metaphorically, the journey ahead continues to be mapped against the political and policy imperatives of government at all levels. A glance at the state-programmed 'GPS' confirms a suggested route for contemporary youth work towards models and modes of practice that encompass policy themes such as employability, accreditation, well-being and crime prevention. In the Scottish policy context the goals and outcomes of youth work have been clearly aligned with the new school Curriculum for Excellence (Learning & Teaching Scotland 2010 & Youthlink Scotland 2012). The primary client group appears to be those young people in the post-school years, confirming a key role for youth work in supporting successful transitions – albeit governed in part by pre-determined destinations.

One potential negative dilemma to emerge over the past decade is whether youth work has or is losing its place as a discrete practice in the policy-driven context and burgeoning emphasis on partnership and integration. Talk of growing crisis in the broad field of youth work practice seems tangible. The current economic climate has ushered in a culture of instability (verging on fear) surrounding funding and subsequently job security. The space for creative and innovative responses to the changing lives and lifestyles of the rising generation runs the risk of being squeezed by bureaucratic regimes of measurement and encoded practice outcomes.

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Claims of a creeping despondency taking hold in the youth work sector appear all too real. The response in some quarters has been organised resistance to and rejection of particular changes in policy in order to protect the unique and discrete role youth workers play in the lives of young people (for example Taylor 2010, Davies 2011). Batsleer (2010) recognises the standpoint of 'permanent opposition' as a long-standing characteristic of youth work (p.153). However, such a position is in contrast to those agencies, organisations and projects continually chasing funding opportunities with chameleon-like adaptability. So how does youth work strike a balance between the political and economic uncertainties affecting practice priorities and a desire to respond effectively to the changing nature of youth? This collection of papers presents an opportunity to engage with the contested identity, role and purpose of the youth worker and interrogate the impact of current policy on modes of practice. The road ahead remains somewhat uncertain. If nothing else the time seems right for youth work practitioners to take stock, draw meaning and inspiration from the past to help understand the present and build a creative and innovative way forward in the future.

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