



### Young People, Social Inclusion & Social Action

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#### Introduction

The lives of young people are constantly under scrutiny. The social construction of their roles and responsibilities within civil society appears to be increasingly controlled by a dominant discourse promoted by the state. They are consistently presented within a contradictory framework that describes them as a perceived threat to social order and the moral fabric of society as well as a pillar of the nation's future. Their relationship to an adult dominated society has become an arena for constant attention from the state and reactive intervention by youth workers and other service providers. The various pathways through the transition from adolescence to adulthood have become indicators of social exclusion and to a greater extent deviancy. Young people's lifestyles and their progression through the pathways of transition are measured against a framework of milestones and objectives constructed by the central and local state to measure their success and failure (Scottish Executive 1999). The potential role of young people as citizens within civil society is pre-determined by their position within the transition towards adulthood. The pathways from adolescence present young people with increasingly extended routes within which decisions have to be made and numerous obstacles overcome. The transition from youth to adult has subsequently become prolonged and often fractured (Wyn & White 1997).

For some commentators young people are navigating through a so-called risk society where they find themselves negotiating a transitional journey aligned by social structures and systems that are unrecognisable to their parents (Furlong & Cartmel 1997). The past two decades have seen a stream of policy driven initiatives that have impacted upon the lives and lifestyles of young people. The systematic restructuring of the youth labour market, restricted access to welfare benefits, age banding of the minimum wage and a limited choice of suitable and affordable housing have created greater dependency upon families (Jones & Wallace 1992, Coles 1995 & MacDonald 1997). As a society we appear to have become



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preoccupied by school failure, unemployment figures, levels of homelessness, teenage pregnancy, drug misuse and the perceived threat of young people hanging around the streets of our, and their, communities (MacDonald 1995, Blackman 1998 & Dwyer & Wyn 2001). The emerging discourse is supported by the media who report the lives and lifestyles of young people with the use of alarmist stereotypes and the promotion of moralistic judgements about the perceived threat that they pose to social stability. The tendency is to identify these problems as youth problems and subsequently particular sections of the generation have become labelled as problem youth, in essence there is a danger of young people being treated as how they are defined. The effect is the alienation and stigmatisation of young people as outsiders and subjects of the rhetoric of social exclusion rather than being seen as social actors with the ability to make a valuable contribution to the community. The intervention of policy and the resultant raft of issues faced by young people present structural barriers to those who are striving to achieve a successful transition through adolescence to the perceived independence of adulthood (Hall 1997). Despite these barriers some young people have shown 'a strong sense of community pride' (ibid: 875) and a willingness to participate in local partnership initiatives within their own neighbourhoods (D.E.T.R. 1997).

### **The challenge for youth work**

The current political rhetoric that promotes the tripartite goals of lifelong learning, social inclusion and active citizenship appears to offer new opportunities for the involvement of young people as stakeholders and partners in the regeneration and local governance of their own communities. The dialectic emerging from an analysis of the dominant discourse provides a context within which models of youth work practice can be developed that aim to build young people's capacity to participate as active citizens within their local community and the wider civil society. The action of young people becoming more involved in local and national democratic processes is being addressed by the Scottish Government through a comprehensive programme of education for citizenship. Cathy Jamieson MSP recently stated that;

Educating young people in ways that prepare them for living effectively and responsibly as members of local, national and global communities is vital to the



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well-being of humanity, now and in the future....the overall goal of education for citizenship in Scotland should be to develop children and young people's capability for thoughtful and responsible participation in political, economic, social and cultural life.

(Learning & Teaching Scotland: 2002: ii)

The idea of active citizenship provides a vehicle to assist young people with the navigation through the transition towards adulthood and provides a clear challenge for youth work. A potential role for practitioners is the development and implementation of an approach that encourages young people to undertake a critical analysis of their own situation in an attempt to gain a broader understanding of how wider structures affect them with the goal of developing a collective agenda for change. The social action model of youth work practice developed by the Centre for Social Action offers a framework for practitioners and young people to work in partnership on issues young people themselves identify as important in their lives.

### **Social Action – definition and principles**

Social Action is defined by the Centre for Social Action (C.S.A.) as:

*an approach which enables groups of people of all ages and in a range of settings, to empower themselves by taking action to achieve their collectively identified goals.*

*(C.S.A. 2000:6)*

The approach is based upon a clear set of principles that are set out by the C.S.A. as:

Social Action workers are committed to social justice. We strive to challenge inequality and oppression in relation to race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, class, culture, disability or any other form of social differentiation.

We believe all people have skills experience and understanding that they can draw on to tackle the problems they face. Social action workers understand



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that people are experts in their own lives and we use this as a starting point for our work.

All people have rights, including the right to be heard, the right to define the issues facing them and the right to take action on their own behalf. People also have the right to define themselves and not have negative labels imposed upon them.

Injustice and oppression are complex issues rooted in social policy, the environment and the economy. Social action workers understand people experience problems as individuals but these difficulties can be translated into common concerns.

We understand that people working collectively can be powerful. People who lack power and influence to challenge injustice and oppression as individuals can gain it through working with other people in a similar position.

Social action workers are not leaders, but facilitators. Our job is to enable people to make decisions for themselves and take ownership of whatever outcome ensues. Everybody's contribution to this process is equally valued and it is vital that our job is not accorded privilege.

(C.S.A. 2001:3)

What begins to emerge from the above definition and principles is a model of practice that is underpinned by a commitment to social justice and social inclusion, two of the pillars of the New Labour government and Scottish Executive. There is an acknowledgement of a rights based approach that promotes a view of the participants (in this case young people), which recognises their abilities to analyse and collectively address problems they face. In other words this is an approach to youth work which is explicitly designed to distance itself from a starting point of viewing the young people in 'deficit' or the 'victim' which is an analysis perceived by some to dominate contemporary youth work (Williamson 1995:11). Social Action youth work is a model of practice that is guided by the range of issues that directly



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affect the social condition of young people living in civil society. It is an alternative approach to tackling the perceived problems of young people that focuses upon their aspirations and capacities as citizens rather than the negative stereotypes promulgated through the discourse of the State and fuelled by the media. According to Skinner et.al.:

Much current work with young people has at its heart – despite all the accompanying rhetoric – the principle that “adults know best”. The Social Action approach starts from the other end. It begins with the concerns, issues and perceptions of young people. It allows young people themselves to set the agenda rather than adults or professionals. This approach goes further than those which offer (token) involvement or participation.

(Skinner et.al. 1997:19)

Social Action youth work is a model of practice that is aimed at groups of young people and provides a vehicle that allows personal issues to become part of a collective agenda (Fyfe 1996). As a process it provides an opportunity for critical analysis where ‘personal troubles can be translated into common concerns’ (Ward & Mullender 1991:28). According to Fleming, Harrison and Ward (1998) there are three main points that distinguish Social Action youth work from ‘traditional’ youth work:

- It is underpinned by a recognition that all people have the capacity to create social change and should be given the opportunity.
- Professionals work in partnership with young people in the community.
- The agenda is handed over to the young people themselves.

(Fleming et.al. 1998: 47)

So what characterises the Social Action approach to youth work that challenges contemporary practice?



### The Social Action process

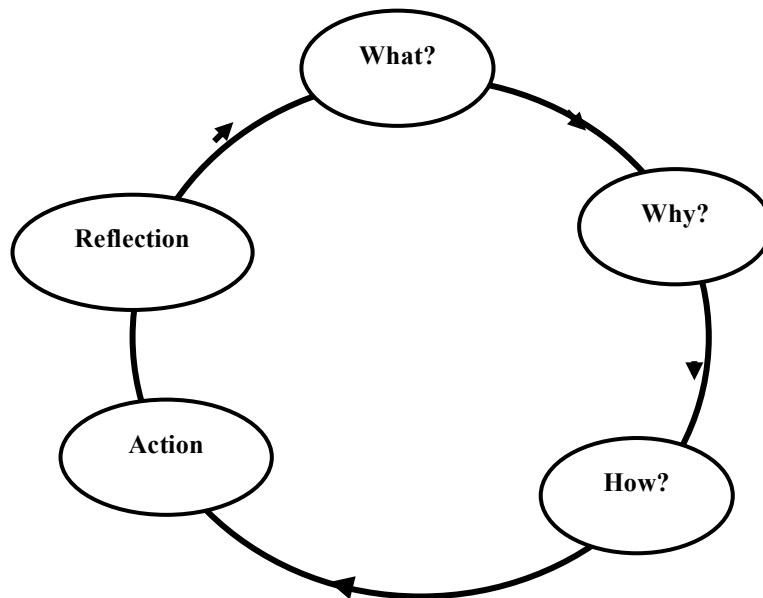
At the heart of the social action process are the five key stages of development where the workers and young people work in partnership to identify and analyse issues, plan and take action and evaluate the outcomes. The process, as illustrated below, begins with the worker helping the group to identify **what** are their issues and concerns? The starting point may also reflect the group setting and purpose with the what question being focussed upon a particular issue within the community such as safety, employment or education. With ongoing support from the worker the group explores **why** the identified issues and concerns exist through a collective analysis of their complexity and causes. The group members then decide **how** they can bring about change. Once these questions have been explored and answered collectively by the group the worker facilitates the young people in taking **action** for themselves. Through **reflection** the group assesses the effectiveness of their action to decide what has been successful, what has not, and so the process begins again with a new agenda. For Fleming, Harrison and Ward:

Asking the question why is the keystone. It enables young people to move, by putting the issues in the wider context, towards awareness, raised consciousness, the pursuit of rights and ultimately to forms of social change activity that challenges the status quo in which such rights are denied.....It enables them to conceive of new explanations in the wider social, political and economic context and to consider how they can identify and engage with these. It turns the spotlight round from the young people as a problem in themselves, to the problem they encounter, and enables young people to see opportunities to develop a much wider range of options for action and change. (Fleming et.al. 1998: 48-49 drawing upon the work of Mullender & Ward 1989).



### The Social Action Process

(C.S.A. 2000)



Through participation in this cyclical process the group themselves undertake a critical analysis of issues affecting them in their lives, make informed choices and ultimately take control and responsibility for their collective actions. The involvement of young people in a collective process that is analytical, creative, visionary, developmental and educational is perhaps a tall order for contemporary youth work practice, but the Social Action process offers the possibilities for such an experience. Through working in partnership with youth work practitioners young people have the potential to develop their critical understanding of social and political issues as well as acquiring new skills such as; organising, planning, campaigning, lobbying, challenging, negotiation, monitoring and evaluation. All of these skills are transferable to other parts of their lives and are essential tools for active citizenship.

### Some conclusions

The Social Action process is rooted in the traditions and themes that have pervaded youth work policy and practice over the past two decades. Notions of informal education, participation, social and personal development and capacity building are at the heart of a



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methodology that is legitimised within the 'new' policy context of social inclusion, lifelong learning and active citizenship. In a challenge to the increasing emphasis upon service provision funded and supported to work with young people perceived to be in or causing trouble Social Action offers a different approach that according to Skinner et.al:

Can demonstrate its effectiveness in engaging with the most alienated and disaffected young people. It not only engages with them, but by tapping into young people's interests, concerns and motivation it activates them to be involved in community work or social change that is relevant to them. They organise and do it for themselves thereby learning new skills and accepting more responsibility along the way.

(Skinner et.al. 1997:19)

Rather than colluding with the dominant view of young people as deviant or in deficit, practitioners need to recognise them as citizens in their own right whose potential political agency should be acknowledged and supported. The Social Action process as defined by the eponymous centre based in De Montfort University is grounded in a distinct theoretical model informed by a set of practice principles that reflect the experiences, needs and goals of both practitioners and service users. As an approach to working with young people the Social Action process clearly demonstrates theoretical and practical merits that respond to the demands of the current policy context. It is not however the only model of youth work practice that can effectively promote social inclusion and must be seen as a complimentary approach alongside other initiatives that have influenced the development of young people as stakeholders within their local communities and the wider civil society.

At the heart of the democratic renewal of Scotland is a genuine desire to invest in young people not only as the future of the nation but also as citizens whose collective voice should be informing the ongoing agenda for change. This is evidenced in the development of a Scottish Youth Parliament and a national network of youth councils and forums. At the time of writing we are witnessing thousands of young people across Scotland and the rest of the world taking part in anti-war demonstrations. However rather than their involvement being heralded as an opportunity for the politicisation of the future electorate it is being met with





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criticism from politicians and the media who are more concerned with issues of their truancy and anti-social behaviour. What the Social Action approach does offer is a methodology that embraces the goals of social inclusion and education for citizenship through clearly seeking to empower young people by seeing them as agents of change rather than a problem to be solved.

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