

On the ground! Interviews with three youth workers:

Sabrina Tickle, Karen Anderson & Gemma Burns

For this Special Issue, we interviewed three practitioners from the Edinburgh area in order to get a brief snapshot of youth work on the ground in the current context. While this sample is by no means representative, it nonetheless offers a glimpse into the contemporary world of youth work and illuminates themes and concerns which are more widely expressed: the adverse consequences of longstanding inequality and poverty - the outcome of wider social and economic processes - as they manifest in available resources, family relationships and personal anxieties; competing expectations, demands and loyalties; a social media world which too often creates and amplifies fear and self-doubt; a sense of pessimism about the future which limits personal aspirations.

Those interviewed are themselves, like many others, working under increasingly precarious employment conditions, causing personal anxiety and limiting scope for the kind of long-term engagement with young people they think is necessary. Whilst negotiating the many contradictions of politics and policy, rhetoric and reality, they strongly reassert the importance of work with young people on equal and respectful terms. They demonstrate the need to create opportunities for young people to relate their own personal experience to macro relations of power, and to consider their options. They are aware of the necessity to work strategically and purposefully within the constraints of context.

Opportunities for building collaboration and solidarity within youth work are often hard to find, but they are always there, as these three workers remind us. We are grateful to them for making the time to think about the questions we put to them, and for the frankness of their responses.

Mel Aitken, Project Worker, Health Opportunities Team, Craigmillar, Edinburgh
Mae Shaw, Honorary Fellow, University of Edinburgh

The Interviewees:

Sabrina Tickle, Sikh Sanjog, Leith, Edinburgh (ST)

Sikh Sanjog helps many 'invisible' women every year who are facing personal challenges. They provide support for BAME women and young people to integrate fully into Scottish society, advice on education and career possibilities and 1:1 counselling services.

Karen Anderson, SHE (Social, Health and Education) Scotland (KA)

SHE is a social enterprise funded by schools who pay the organisation to undertake educational workshops with pupils. The organisation aims to support girls and young women to be empowered, supported, aspirational and improve their life chances.

Gemma Burns The Health Opportunities team, Craigmillar, Edinburgh (GB)

The Health Opportunities Team supports young people aged 12-25 with their emotional well-being, mental health, and sexual health. They offer therapeutic 1:1 sessions and group work in schools, through drop-ins, and in the community.

The Questions:

1. Describe your role with young people

ST started as a sessional youth worker with Sikh Sanjog over 6 years ago, moving on to Youth Work Manager, and now Youth and Community Work Manager. Her post is funded by a combination of Lottery and local authority and her contract is funding-dependent.

Her primary role in the organisation is to plan and implement strategic direction and secure funding, but she also chooses to be involved in direct work with young people.

She regards herself primarily as a youth worker and wishes to retain that role within the organisation.

Amongst other things, the organisation offers activities and support for 5-16 year olds. This unusually wide age range is largely because: a) for cultural family reasons, older young people are largely unable to attend without their younger siblings; and b) familiarity between younger and older young people creates an informal mentoring culture which pervades the project. There has in recent years been a changing focus on the younger age group in order to further develop this mentoring relationship. The project emphasises long-term relationships with the users of their services. Many parents/adults were involved in the project as young people, so there is an underlying level of trust in and support for the project. This degree of credibility within and from the local Sikh community is essential for providing legitimacy, particularly in relation to funding, but it can also create tensions for professional practitioners operating to different values.

As BAME communities in general come under increasing social stress and economic pressure, traditional beliefs and practices which may be at odds with liberal values can become further entrenched. Emphasising, or insisting upon, traditional roles for girls and women is one example. The agency manages this dynamic by holding issue-based group work upstairs with girls, and a more open access youth club downstairs for younger siblings. Sabrina describes this as a 'slow and gentle approach' which takes account of local sensitivities.

The credibility afforded the project over time offers the opportunity for workers to 'plant a seed' in relation to challenging particular rules and roles, within a social justice policy framework, whilst at the same time retaining trust and confidence within the community. This can be a delicate balance to maintain and relies on sustained and respectful relationships as much as policy.

Although Sabrina is not, herself, a Sikh and is aware of the optics of a non-BAME person holding the most senior role in the organisation, this position is also seen to

confer a degree of objectivity which can be viewed as an advantage within such a tightly-knit community.

KA's role is to conduct workshops, alongside volunteers (SHE ambassadors) who, in turn, become involved in running workshops in their own schools and in the local community. Such workshop experience can be formally accredited through an SQA mentoring award with Edinburgh College (20 weeks).

The organisation is essentially run by women for women and has the following purposes:

- To train up women to go back into working with girls, in schools and youth work contexts
- To provide positive role models for young women
- To provide a supportive network of women - a 'sisterhood'
- To produce positive impact on attainment and ambition amongst girls
- To deliver issue based girls work on the themes of self-esteem, resilience, confidence, relationships and transitions.

The project was piloted in 2017/18, drawing upon Karen's established background and connections within the area, along with her long experience and advocacy of girls work in a range of settings and funding models. These factors, together, have given the project added credibility amongst potential participants and funders. She has recently trained as a life-coach, as a supplement to her Community Education degree, in order to prepare for the specific demands of the project.

GB's role is to support young people in the South West of the city who are affected by their own or parents/carers substance use. This includes therapeutic 1:1 sessions, therapeutic group work and advocacy. The key elements of the role include relationship building, listening and developing coping strategies based on what young people find difficult and what they feel would benefit them. This post is partnership-funded by the CORRA Foundation (previously Lloyds TSB Foundation for Scotland) and the Big

Lottery. The relationship with funders is largely positive because they look beyond typical quantitative measures, valuing the qualitative impact the work potentially has on young people.

2. What do you think are the most important issues for young people?

ST

Gendered social inequalities, restricted family expectations and gendered ambitions for girls in particular. Young people are generally encouraged by and within their community not to discuss views or identities which challenge traditional values. This can present difficulties for young people who inhabit (at least) two sometimes incompatible worlds which have to somehow be negotiated, and can bring them into conflict with their elders and/or with their peers. This context highlights the importance for youth workers to provide safe spaces where these conflicting experiences and expectations can be aired and discussed. A prime recent example is sexual health, where traditional messages about gender identities may need to be explored or challenged.

A general lack of suitably experienced and qualified BAME youth workers is a major disadvantage.

KA

Mental health, both their own and that of family, friends, and the surrounding community. Sources of mental ill health are complex, but include generational poverty and the impact that has on living circumstances, future prospects, aspirations, and self-esteem; anxiety and loss of social connection caused by the damaging effects of some forms of social media on face-to-face interaction and the ways people relate to each other on- and offline; constant judgement by others, including overt intimidation, leading to fear and extreme self-doubt; a very limited view of the world, their place in it, and positive values which might guide their lives.

The debilitating effects of class-related differences, and gendered roles which limit personal aspirations.

Although tackling mental health is constantly asserted as a policy priority, insufficient resources are made available to address it in any meaningful way; rather, expectations are created, but left largely unfulfilled.

Lack of opportunities for group work which is framed around personal development (as distinct from personal attainment).

GB

Mental health in general and severely low self-esteem in particular constitute an 'epidemic' that young people are experiencing. Alongside this, there is a severe lack of services equipped to support children and young people with their mental health. What is available is completely insufficient. For example, the lengthy waiting times to access CAMHS (Children and Adolescents Mental Health Service), young people not meeting the restrictive 'criteria', and a '3 strikes and you're out' policy. This has an added negative impact on the young people affected and is not conducive to building the positive relationships required at the time of a mental health crisis. The project can offer some support in this regard: 'When young people suffer, talking helps, we listen, things can get better.'

Rising poverty and generational trauma whereby households, families and communities are impacted by longstanding adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). A high proportion of young people using the project have experienced the distress of family breakdown, crime, parental mental ill health, sexual abuse and neglect. Poverty, mental health, substance use and a lack of services are clearly interlinked.

Eating problems related to poor self-esteem as a result of increased social media exposure, pressure from peers and constant negative comparison with others.

3. What do you think are the problems for contemporary youth work?**ST**

Lack of diversity across the board in services. Because of traditional/specific values, requirements and expectations, access to mainstream services (such as are available) are not always an option. In addition, all BAME people tend to be regarded in policy and practice as the same in terms of needs and demands, leading to inappropriate services.

Lack of youth facilities in general. Young people are effectively excluded from many existing community facilities because of funding requirements, and a widespread business model which demands that such facilities are self-funding.

Geographical boundaries tend to be numbers- and funding-driven, excluding young people who do not relate to such boundaries. In some areas, young people are 'claimed' to meet targets, whilst others are excluded. This can lead to a kind of tokenism: 'Everybody wants you' when under pressure to justify funding applications or satisfy policy agendas.

Competition between groups for limited funding.

Funding cuts which result in short-term support, make maintaining relationships with young people almost impossible because these involve time and effort. This context also restricts the kinds of activity which can be undertaken because it is so outcome-driven.

In any case, the current preoccupation with measuring impact means that there is less open-ended contact with young people, on respectful and mutual terms. The benefits of youth work are impossible to measure with any real impact only becoming apparent years later.

Reluctance to professionalise youth work resulting in it not being seen as a legitimate and valuable career choice.

The emphasis on 'lived experience' in policy can reframe poverty and inequality as personal troubles requiring personalised solutions/fixes rather than as public issues which need to be addressed at a political level.

The gap between 'local engagement' and political structures and processes which individualises social problems and has little impact on policy development.

KA

The way the education system/curriculum limits the possibilities for personal development in favour of measurable outcomes.

Insufficient recognition at policy level of the value of group work for young people in the short and long term.

The way in which increased competition for resources forces organisations to 'offer more for less' leading to a potential dilution in the quality (and/or quantity) of youth work offered.

A measurement-driven policy regime in which quantitative impact is valued over qualitative interaction through long-term relationship building.

Insufficient time for practitioners to undertake additional training, or for evaluation and planning of their work.

Insufficient training opportunities for youth work practitioners in supporting young people with increasingly severe mental health problems.

An acute lack of childcare for initiatives aimed at women, severely limiting the possibilities for such opportunities to be taken up. Although mutual childcare models

are being developed, more intensive resourcing for childcare is required to make an appreciable difference in provision.

GB

Lack of long term financial sustainability for youth projects. At the core of work with young people is relationship-building, and this cannot be achieved with short-term funding.

Not only do young people suffer from such short-termism, but also youth workers themselves. There is a tacit expectation that, in spite of budget cuts, projects complete the same amount of work with less staff and less resources. This causes extra stress and has an adverse impact on practitioners' own mental health and well-being.

Increased incidence of tertiary contracts, whereby youth workers are employed short-term, for particular pieces of work. This insecure form of employment results in working multiple jobs simultaneously, many of which pay only for contact time with young people. This means that work planning, evaluation, support and supervision are conducted in workers' own time, or not at all. The demands of this form of employment can easily lead to burnout, or to personal dissatisfaction at not being able to perform at the best level for young people.

4. What do you think are the possibilities for contemporary youth work?**ST**

Some of the 'problems' outlined can also offer some degree of possibility. For example, a model which needs 'customers' to meet targets potentially provides opportunities for 'bargaining': being strategic, finding spaces for more open-ended engagement.

There is a growing recognition among practitioners that work with young people around their needs, interests and concerns needs to be revived.

Drawing upon 'lived experience' in planning of services can be valuable if it is genuinely undertaken, and not simply applied in a tokenistic or managerial way. More BAME voices need to be heard.

Organic collaboration between youth organisations in spite of the difficult circumstances in which many operate.

There is a strong case for offering spaces and places where young people want to come, rather than be 'referred' by various welfare agencies.

NB Sabrina also referred to youth work she is involved with in a disadvantaged area of Edinburgh. This work is locally crowd-funded and is largely independent of the state. This example of 'communities taking control of their own services' is a challenge to 'public services' as they have been traditionally understood and raises questions about the appropriate role of the state.

KA

An acknowledgement that the distinctive relationships which can be created between young people and youth work practitioners continues to offer a unique opportunity for personal and relational development.

Youth workers should seek opportunities to emphasise the positive contribution they make.

Working in partnership, in spite of dominant competitive models. This involves working collaboratively and strategically in mutually-enhancing ways.

The possibilities for extending the SHE model elsewhere: 'It's not just a name, it's an aspiration' .

The possibility of developing a fellow organisation *He for She* (currently being piloted) aimed at creating more positive relationships between boys and girls, taking into account more fluid gender relations and offering non-gendered activities.

Opportunities for wider collaborations (eg with the arts) to explore and examine the damaging effects of social media on body image, and for relating the personal and political dimensions of the online world.

GB

The possibility to work alongside funders to renegotiate targets reflexively in order to best meet young people's needs. This includes the possibility of framing funding bids to include meaningful consultation with young people, potentially addressing needs which are not necessarily consistent with funding priorities. This change in dynamic would also allow for budgets to be more creatively directed, and for funding relationships to become more equal/negotiable.

Possibilities for genuine partnership working, whereby young peoples' multiple needs can be addressed by a range of appropriate agencies simultaneously, without them being continually 'passed on' to another service.

A more co-ordinated approach could encourage stronger networks based on collaboration in spite of funding regimes which create competitive relations between projects.

The distinctive qualities that youth workers bring, in particular the skill of building relationships, should not be undervalued. Youth work has the possibility to be about exchanging Really Useful Knowledge, with young people as experts in bringing their experiences and needs to set the agenda. Services need the flexibility and expertise to make this possible. Acknowledging the impacts of ACEs, looking behind behaviour, and reinforcing an approach that is strengths-based and builds resistance is a significant opportunity.