

Keeping it real? Part-time youth workers at the centre and periphery

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Equality and participation are portrayed as central principles of youth work, but it has always been questionable how deeply they are embedded in reality. Even where attention is given to anti-oppressive practice with young people, staffing structures tend to be hierarchical and undemocratic. This was noted in a review of training provision nearly thirty years ago and remains true today:

Part-time youth workers, paid or unpaid, occupy a contradictory position. They work face to face with young people and so are at the centre of what goes on: but they are more often than not at the periphery when it comes to many of the decisions and discussions that affect their work. (Bolger & Scott, 1984, p.7)

Since these words were written the contradiction they expose has been strengthened by the intensification of neoliberal education and policy regimes. As youth work becomes increasingly managerial and bureaucratic, full-timers and managers tend to leave more of the everyday practice to paid and volunteer part-time workers. Many of these part-timers develop close relationships with young people, but feel alienated from the money-oriented and target-driven environments in which they work. Starkly, those youth workers who spend most of their time with young people are the worst paid and least likely to be heard.

I am researching how part-time youth workers experience their roles in this policy context. So far, twenty-five paid and voluntary part-time youth workers have contributed to the study through in-depth interviews, discussion groups or both. Participants chose false names for the purposes of the research to preserve their

anonymity. The workers are from diverse settings and backgrounds and have between one and more than twenty years of youth work experience. As an experienced part-time youth worker myself, I am combining these interview findings with reflections on my own experiences.

Of the diverse themes arising from this research, many affect full-timers as well as part-timers: love, passion and commitment for work with young people; concerns about targets, bureaucracy, stress and surveillance; struggles to hold on to principles and values; and issues of identity and equality. This article focuses instead on part-timers' perspectives on the *differences* between part-time and full-time, paid and voluntary youth work. While occasional mention was made of financial constraints, greater availability for family and other commitments, and lack of time at work, two main themes arose repeatedly: the positive focus on face to face work, and concerns about being marginalised and under-valued at work.

'I think the face to face time is what keeps you real'

The most positive side of being a part-timer, whether paid or unpaid, was repeatedly said to be the focus on direct work with young people. As voluntary sector youth club volunteer Navaeh put it, 'I think the face to face time is what keeps you real, it's what keeps you wanting to do it.' Interacting with young people is practically her only responsibility, evident when she describes a typical evening at work:

I walk in and first thing I do is set up, like pool cues, snack bar, anything like that, and then I *literally* spend the evening going from group to group chatting to people, anything they want to talk about. If I see people on the computer I'll go, 'how's your day been, how's everything going?' They come to me, they chat to me.

As a 'young' 25-year-old who grew up on a neighbouring estate with a tough reputation, Navaeh sees herself as a 'bridge' between the young people and the paid youth workers at her local youth club. 'My supervisor said it, she said they speak to me a little different, because of my age as well, because I'm quite young, and I know about

stuff that they're talking about.' She relishes the freedom in her voluntary role to spend time with young people, and worries that as she progresses in her youth work career this will become less of a focus:

I think if I could survive on being a volunteer youth worker for the rest of my life it would be brilliant, but I probably can't... I like it where I'm at, at the minute. If I could stay and volunteer for a while I'd prefer that, just cos I've seen the other side.

This 'other side' is seen by Navaeh and others to be the work done by senior (most often full-time) workers who are generally perceived by part-timers as having limited time to spend with young people. Consequently, many workers in the study expressed reservations about becoming full-timers themselves. Ox, for example, as a paid youth club part-timer with over a decade of experience, was uninterested in becoming a 'career youth worker' as he put it:

I think a lot of people get involved in certain jobs that they do and they're good at those jobs, and then when they become good at them they become promoted and they lose that initial contact that they had, and it's kind of a bit sad.

Mark, a paid part-time youth worker and mentor in the voluntary sector, spoke of a 'fear of going up in youth work':

I think that the minute you go full-time you might spend maybe fifty percent or below of your time with face to face but the rest of it is definitely gonna be paperwork. Maybe reports, funding, seeking funding, all the other stuff that comes with it.

Actual youth work was prioritised over other considerations even by those part-timers who had relatively senior positions, such as Tracy, the paid coordinator of a small faith-based voluntary sector organisation:

I don't turn up at the meetings any more. Because you know the kind of youth work community meetings where everybody sits together with what they're doing with young people and so on? I just thought, 'this is a farce! It's just going round and round,' and especially when you're part-time, the frustration is, I can either be a youth worker, or I can attend meetings.

Unlike volunteers whose roles tended not to include administrative work, paid part-timers contrasted work that tangibly benefits young people with other demands such as monitoring and attempting to meet targets, as Lucy (a paid part-time youth worker in the voluntary sector) describes:

I just care about stressing about activities for young people, you know I'd rather put my stress into, 'oh I need to plan this trip because they really want it and I don't want to let them down'. Rather than, 'I've got to write this report and I've got to kind of use words that are saying we did meet this [target]' but we didn't.

In this respect, the initial findings of my study seem to confirm the conclusions of other recent research. Lehal (2010) found that part-time youth workers in particular disliked target-driven paperwork because it took them away from direct work with young people. Davies and Merton's (2009, p.14) study of twelve youth services found that part-timers:

could seem seriously demotivated by the target culture, claiming that at their level its dilemmas were felt most acutely. They talked of pressure to get the numbers through and of crude counting and measuring by managers interested only in outcomes often unconnected with their practice – or young people's everyday realities.

Part-timers value their work because of its focus on young people, and yet they are inevitably caught up in the managerial and bureaucratic policy context. Being caught up, however, is not the same as being included.

'I *thought* part-time and full-time staff had to be given equal rights'

Being a volunteer is quite liberating in the way that you are just able to kind of go in, do your thing, focus on the young people... but at the same time I'm frustrated with it because I've not got the opportunity to say, 'we should do this, we should take this forward and we should try this.' (Nicola, youth club volunteer, voluntary sector.)

To differing extents, most of the volunteers and part-time youth workers in this study felt distanced from decisions and discussions affecting their work. Their exclusion has been exacerbated in recent years by managerial cultures, but is based on a longer history of hierarchical staffing structures in which it is assumed that volunteers turn up and hang out with young people, part-timers do the same as well as planning activities and looking after petty cash, and neither are invited to 'full-time meetings' where policy decisions might be discussed. This difference was starkly experienced by Bridget when her hours were reduced and her contract changed by her voluntary sector employer:

When I went onto a sessional contract I wasn't allowed at meetings any more, I wasn't allowed at the away day any more. Because [colleague]'s a volunteer she isn't allowed at meetings. Now [different colleague]'s part-time, oh, she's not allowed any more.

As well as being unable to meet with colleagues, many part-timers were not given access to vital information. This was a particular problem for Rachel, a part-time street-based youth worker in a local authority who spent several months with no manager:

Part-time staff didn't have access to any of the computers so we couldn't log on, didn't have an email address, couldn't access the intranet... I *thought* part-time and full-time staff had to be given equal rights but we never had any of that, so that's very difficult without somebody running the project.

The positive side of being out on a limb was a certain level of freedom and autonomy, enjoyed by some of the part-timers, and more particularly the volunteers. Sam, a teaching assistant who set up a youth group in her school, said of volunteering that 'I'm not under them same restrictions of being paid – I feel like it's completely liberated me'. Louise, a volunteer in a local authority street-based youth project, exercised democratic freedoms denied to her paid colleagues:

In my head I think, 'well I don't have a contract and you're not paying me, so really I could possibly bend the rules and it doesn't really matter'. And at the moment there are a lot of things people are saying 'you shouldn't do this', like protesting [against youth service cuts] for example, 'you shouldn't do this because you're a council employee'... so when they had the big council meeting that people could go and make their points to, none of the employees went because, they stood outside but none of them went in because they weren't allowed... whereas I was able to go in.

As Louise's story illustrates, many full-timers are also disenfranchised and have limited say on decisions about their work. In addition, it should be noted that not every part-timer and volunteer felt disadvantaged by their status. Leo, now a paid part-time street-based youth worker in a local authority, remembers feeling fully involved when he started as a volunteer:

I always felt even at that early time I was involved in meetings, training, you know, I did me level 3 qualification early on, which was a part-time youth work qualification that you got. And residentials, you was always involved in that, you know, getting involved in the bigger things, not just

engaging in a club or whatever. It was about taking it further and seeing the end product of initially engaging with a group.

My own experience as a part-timer has varied considerably. Voluntary sector organisations are not necessarily more democratic; I have worked in a charity where part-timers were employed on insecure weekly contracts, and a local authority team in which budget and organisational decisions were made in weekly meetings with part-timers fully included. How far volunteers and part-timers are informed and included tends to depend more than anything else on how democratically inclined their manager is.

There is a virtual consensus amongst youth workers, managers and policy makers that young people should be involved in decisions about youth work, even if this is patchily implemented. And yet, there seems to be no such consensus about informing and involving those who work most closely with young people, most often volunteers and part-timers. Alan, an experienced and relatively senior local authority part-timer put it down to trust:

It's like, 'look, we turn up, we do our job, we do it well - trust us'. And there's not much trust in part-time workers at all... which then leads to resentment and then people become untrustworthy, because they're like, 'well, I can't be bothered'. We never get any praise for anything, we never get any thanks for anything, we're the ones doing the bloody job.

According to youth work rhetoric, young people are central and participation is a touchstone; so is it too much to ask that those of us working directly with young people should be involved in discussions and decisions about this work?

Time for change?

The most straightforward and immediate way of improving the working life of part-timers would be for youth work organisations to embed a deeper level of workplace participation: to include all workers and volunteers in regular meetings, give them

choices over how much information they would like to receive by email, develop workers' councils, and create spaces for part-timers and volunteers to support each other and share concerns and ideas. However, the effectiveness of these more democratic models will always be limited by the ways in which work tends to be valued, rewarded and organised. More fundamental changes are needed, and I will finish with some suggestions about what these might look like.

Firstly, the link between status and hours worked should be rejected, not only in youth work but on a societal scale. The assumption that only full-time work is 'proper work' discriminates against women who are more likely to work part-time, and against everyone else who needs or wants time for activities outside of their primary job. If working part-time became the norm and was more fairly rewarded, unpaid work such as child-rearing, caring and housework as well as paid work would be more fairly distributed. This change is recommended by a recent report from the New Economics Foundation (2010, p.2):

A 'normal' working week of 21 hours could help to address a range of urgent, interlinked problems: overwork, unemployment, over-consumption, high carbon emissions, low well-being, entrenched inequalities, and the lack of time to live sustainably, to care for each other, and simply to enjoy life.

Secondly, the situation where experienced youth workers are too busy for direct work with young people must be challenged. Again, this is mirrored beyond youth work and is a consequence of performance targets, short term funding, competition, technological change and bureaucracy. It also points to an under-valuing of the skills and practice of direct work with people, and an over-valuing of managerial tasks. Without transforming such policies and cultures, young people and newer colleagues miss out on beneficial contact with and learning from the most experienced workers.

Thirdly, managerial hierarchy (however democratically organised) cannot be justified as the 'only' possible structure for youth projects. For the last two years I have been involved alongside colleagues and young people in starting a small youth workers' co-

operative with no managers, where workers (all working part-time, and with different levels of experience) have equal status and equal pay¹. We share face to face, administrative and organisational work between us, allocating most responsibilities to two or three people, and create formal and informal support structures. The organisation is by no means perfect and we are learning all the time, reflecting for example on how we can minimise informal hierarchies. Despite its challenges, our structure means that each of us is involved in decisions about our work, while focusing on our work with young people - 'keeping it real'.

References

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¹ See www.voice-of-youth.org