



## Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

### Introduction

For over 20 years *Concept* has been engaging critically with theoretical ideas and policy discourses that shape youth work practice. Over that time, the journal has published a diverse range of articles and reviews focussed on aspects of youth work from the perspective of practitioners and academic commentators alike. In 1998 *Concept* published an edited collection of articles relating to youth work theory and practice entitled *Conceptualising Youth Work: Back to the future*.

This second youth work reader brings together some of the published work from *Concept* over the past decade, together with new writing that reflects current thinking, challenges and concerns for practice. The publication of these contemporary pieces of work is in part the culmination of collaboration between *Concept* and youth work colleagues engaged in face-to face practice. Also, the re-published archived papers have in most cases been updated by the respective authors, bringing fresh meaning to topics explored in the original work. The result is a snapshot of the dominant ideas pervading policy and the field of practice.

There has been a growing sense that youth work is under a critical spotlight; resulting in a range of responses that defend and reaffirm the merits, traditions and principles that set youth work apart from other approaches to working with young people. The specific political and policy context of Scotland provides the backdrop for the bulk of the written contributions in this collection, although the issues considered will surely resonate across a wider community of youth work colleagues.

The opening paper by the editors suggests that the field of youth work is at a metaphorical crossroads. It takes a look back at the policy and practice developments over the last ten years in order to explain where we are and how we got here. Yet it also attempts to highlight some of the possible routes open to the field into the future. Following on from this, Tony Jeffs poses a deep and challenging question. He asks “what ever happened to radical youth work”? Underlying such a question is an attempt to reengage the reader with the historical



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antecedents of contemporary youth work practice. For Jeffs, radical work is characterised by ‘workers committed to not merely working with young people, but working with young people in order to try to create a better society’ This is a sentiment reflected throughout this collection of papers which is presented as an addition to the recent swell of youth work-related publications and commentary.

The papers in this series go on, in their own way, to address Tony Jeffs’ question as well as showcase the possibilities for change and development in the future. A number of themes emerge which point to some key issues faced by young people today whilst at the same time highlighting the challenges, constraints and opportunities faced in contemporary practice. These include: the identity, role and purpose of the youth work practitioner; young people’s rights and their perceived lack of political participation; the impact of the negative perceptions of young people in the media and policy; youth unemployment, and the impact of the economic crisis. Consistent across the selected papers is acknowledgement of a dominant managerial culture of performance measurement and outcome-focused approaches. Central to this is consideration of how practice can be shaped in the future.

The papers in this volume fall into general thematic groupings starting with Tony Jeffs challenge to revisit the ideas of radical youth work. The following articles from Tony Taylor, Dod Forrest and Ian Fyfe, explore in different ways approaches to working with young people which help them think about their world and find their own ways to act to change it for the better.

The papers by Lynne Tammi and Stuart Moir analyse the relationship between young people’s rights and their political participation. Tammi explores the opportunities and constraints involved in young people achieving their rights as envisioned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), whilst Moir looks at the lack of electoral participation by young people and offers a possible means to increase their participation in the electoral process.

Both Stuart Waiton and Mike Bell take a critical look at aspects of the current policy context and the ways they frame work with young people. Bell offers a critical review of policy in



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Scotland and suggests that there is a conceptual tension between the thrust of government policy and the traditions, methods and approaches of youth work. Waiton investigates the way in which negative perceptions of young people as ‘neds’ and ‘yobs’ can have an impact on policy which sees young people as presenting problems that need to be ‘fixed’ rather than in terms of the need to promote and support their positive development for the future.

The closing papers from Alan MacKie and Lynn Hill review the current economic crisis and how this impacts on the lives and lifestyles of young people and the professional field of practice. Both authors raise concerns about the dangers of narrowing down and allying the purpose of youth work with the demands of the labour market.

We think this volume of papers will provide those with an interest in young people and youth work with a critical analysis of the current policy and practice context, but perhaps more importantly it can also offer some practical tools and approaches which may motivate and inspire those in the field who want to develop or sustain a more critical approach and who want to “work with young people in order to try to create a better society”.

Ian Fyfe & Stuart Moir

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