



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

An Empowering Approach to Working with Young People.

Dod Forrest

Introduction

This paper addresses the question - how can young people, from a starting point of powerlessness, become empowered? It is argued that the immediate future for many young people will be the experience of injustice, impoverishment and inequality. Paradoxically, this experience can also be the starting point for change at a personal and political level. Youth workers can assist a movement from powerlessness to empowerment in these circumstances of austerity. Perspectives on empowerment that facilitate this process are identified alongside a case study of this practice.

Young people in the UK now inhabit a world where significant changes in family circumstances, the labour market, leisure facilities, lifestyle, communications and levels of dependence and independence now seriously affects the transition from being a young person to becoming an adult (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). This is an era where transitions to adulthood are now extended further into the life cycle than experienced by previous generations and this trend has been exacerbated by the impact of the global economic crisis within the UK.

The shift of responsibility for the welfare of young people from the state to the family and community, coupled with structural unemployment has created pressures, especially for young men and many young women that have seriously increased the incidence of suicide, depression, eating disorder and self – harm as identified in a report published by the British Medical Association (2006)¹. This report reveals that one in ten under 16's in the UK experience some mental disorder such as eating, emotional or behavioural difficulties. The

¹ Certain groups of children and adolescents are at greater risk of suffering mental health problems. As this report highlights, socio economic factors play a significant role, and there is a higher prevalence of mental health problems among children from deprived backgrounds. Looked after children (ie children brought in the care of local authorities) are at particular risk, as are refugee and asylum seeker children, and young offenders.



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BMA estimated that 1.1 million children would benefit from help with problems such as depression, anxiety, bulimia, hyperactivity, anger, self harm and suicide.

Millions of young people in Britain now experience material and cultural impoverishment. In many instances school playing fields have been sold for speculative development. The libraries in the same area have closed or restrict opening hours. Community Centres remain understaffed and are increasingly managed by volunteers. This is an economic environment with diminishing local authority support towards the development of play, education and youth facilities. It is evident that impending austerity measures will mean core services for all young people will increasingly require entry charges or face closure. Clearly this impacts most on the increasing number of young people living in poverty.

In this new era of the governing Coalition's 'big society' empowerment has been adopted as a key idea that underpins recent social policy as identified in David Cameron's speech in Liverpool in July, 2010:

The three strands of the big society agenda include social action (for which the government had to foster a culture of voluntarism and philanthropy); public service reform eliminating centralised bureaucracy "that wastes money and undermines morale" – and community empowerment, "creating communities with oomph", the neighbourhoods being "in charge of their own destiny" (Watt, 2010)

This is significant in that the concept of empowerment has repeatedly been contested. I have argued that empowerment is both ideological and conscientised (Forrest, 1999). Baistow (1994) and Rappaport (1981) have analysed this contested paradox of empowerment, concluding that it is an idea that is both liberatory and regulative. Rappaport makes a plea for professionals to become more part of a social movement for change so as to resolve the contradictions of human needs and human rights:



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Our task as researchers, scholars and professionals should be to ‘unpack’ and influence contemporary resolutions of paradox and that to do this we need to be more of a social movement than a profession (Rappaport, 1981:1).

In the context of the present UK government initiatives the poorest communities and families are to be empowered to manage the consequences of poverty and inequality with less resources and more responsibility. It is also the case that following the New Labour Project, there continues to be an ideology of blame as a rationale for shifting responsibility for the ills of society onto the so-called ‘undeserving’ poor. Consequently, the children and young people of such families live in circumstances of considerable stigma and ill health.

For many such young people the official remedy all too often is a ‘pill for every ill’ - in many cases a dose of Ritalin to be taken every day as a substitute for discussion in the first place and activity that could be spent creatively in play and sport. Interestingly, a new disease ‘Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder’ (ADHD) that is supposed to affect up to 10% of UK children has been created and diagnosed as an explanation for the behaviour of hyperactive young people. However one neuroscientist captures this situation in social rather than behavioural terms and raises an important question:

The ‘disorder’ (ADHD) is characterised by poor school performance and inability to concentrate in class or to be controlled by parents and is supposed to be a consequence of disorderly brain function associated with the neurotransmitter, dopamine. The prescribed treatment is an amphetamine-like drug called Ritalin. There is an increasing world-wide epidemic of Ritalin use. Untreated children are said to be likely to be more at risk of becoming criminals and there is an expanding literature on the ‘genetics of criminal and anti-social behaviour’. Is this an appropriate medical/psychiatric approach to an individual problem, or a cheap fix to avoid the necessity of questioning schools, parents and the broader social context of education? (Rose, 2006: 6)

Arguably, personalised blame individualises a social problem. However, there is evidence from the literature on empowerment (Rappaport et al 1984; Kieffer, 1984; Lord and



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McKillop Farlow, 1990; Wallerstein, 1993; Wallerstein and Sanchez-Merki, 1994) that this process can be countered by fostering collective association that facilitates empowerment for group and community action.

Perspectives on Empowerment

Empowerment emerges from personal experience (Kieffer, 1984). It begins with action, in many instances provoked by an acute sense of injustice, which leads to reflection and analysis of this action, which can lead to further action. Who participates in this action and engages with the individual and in what manner this experience is generalised and developed into group, association and community action is the core issue addressed by this paper. It is argued that the role of the youth worker should be essentially that of an educationalist who adheres to certain explicit values and engages with young people in a dialogical manner. This approach to empowerment is described later in this paper by means of a case study of an action research project undertaken by the author and colleagues during the late 1990s in the Mastrick area of north Aberdeen (Wood, 1997; Forrest and Wood 1999). The principal aim of this empowering approach was to generate an environment where young people and young women in particular, could develop their own forms of communication and association amongst each other, with the support of youth workers, working towards an analysis of their life situation.

One contemporary example of this perspective on empowerment which seeks to specifically mobilise women is to be found in the work of the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (1993). The TGNP has the following perspective on empowerment;

...a process which increases the capacity of women and other disempowered people to analyse and know the world at all levels i.e. household, village, national, global; to act on their own behalf; to increase their power and control over the social resources necessary for sustainable and dignified life (p 29).

This perspective is put into practice through the building of 'networks'. This means generating solidarity with other women through creating alliances and taking collective action. The development of women's autonomous organisation is central to this process.



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This requires the growth of organisational skills and leadership and the raising of funds to service the membership. The issues of injustice and exploitation that affect women are highlighted by using the media, producing publications and generally making public the issues of poverty. The demands of this movement are for greater democracy in the process of decision-making as it affects the day to day life of villagers.

Within this framework of empowerment a study of community activism proposes a view of empowerment as a necessarily long-term process of adult learning and development (Kieffer, 1984). Kieffer describes this process as the 'construction of a multi-dimensional participatory competence...[which] encompasses both cognitive and behavioural change' (p9). Accordingly engagement of this sort with young people creates a more positive self-concept for the young person and sense of self competence. It also generates a construction of a more critical and analytical understanding of the social and political environment and the cultivation of individual and collective resources for social and political action.

At a more personal level Lord and McKillop Farlow (1990) sought to investigate how and why certain individuals, in spite of being labelled 'rejects' by the wider community, because of ill health, disability or age, were still able to gain control of their own lives and to assist others in the community. Their study was designed to find out from 'the empowered' the essential elements which make up this process of gaining control from a starting point of powerlessness.

At the heart of these perspectives on empowerment lies an examination of the power relationship between educator and educated. Freire (1976) argues that education cannot be neutral, in a society of oppressor and oppressed. Conscientised² education can liberate the mind from ideological domination that sustains the existing power relationships; conversely education that is manipulative can act to domesticate and deceive the majority of the population – a process that is essentially ideological, acting to reinforce the status

² Conscientisation represents the development of the awakening of critical awareness. It will not appear as a natural by-product of even major economic changes but must grow out of a critical educational effort based on favourable historical conditions. (Freire, 1976: 19)



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quo³. Freire (ibid) captures this perspective by querying whom reality hurts, and equally, if not more importantly, whom reality serves?

Empowerment as an Educational Process

A process of dialogical education is essentially empowering if that education avoids the pitfalls of traditional education (Freire 1973, 1976). Traditional education is dismissed as a 'banking system' where the individual learner becomes a mere receptacle and teaching becomes an act of deposit-making, devoid of creativity and critique (Freire, ibid). This form of education is now increasingly standardised and exemplified by 'learning outcomes' and pre-defined 'competencies', and it is this form of machine-model, systems-evaluation methodology that underpins most managerial supervision of youth work practice. This emphasis on the management of pre-defined targets has substantially influenced the practice of contemporary youth work. In this setting the youth worker is expected to pre-define the knowledge requirements of the young person, invariably within the context of a social problem e.g. teenage pregnancy; anti-social behaviour; drug abuse - to mention only a few of the periodic moral panics that surround the lives of young people today. An increasingly centralised curriculum also means that youth workers in turn are set parameters of legitimacy by the state, albeit Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* offers some opportunities to reverse this trend. (Scottish Executive, 2005).

Freirean youth work practice seeks to promote a quite different relationship between the youth worker and the young person. This informal education is only possible where there is a setting that offers control, participation, power and resources. In these circumstances young people will voluntarily come in from the street corner and engage with youth workers in an environment of mutual respect and dialogue. In this respect, Kieffer (ibid) found that a key link in the chain of this process was the adult who adopted the role of mentor in the dialogical relationship described by Freire. The following case study illuminates this mentoring youth work role when complimented by an action researcher or action research

³ The meaning given to ideology in this pejorative sense is the concealment of contradiction and conflict. This is ideology defined in the classical Marxist sense as a set of ideas that seeks to manufacture consent and obscure the real world of economic exploitation.



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brief. It is this relationship that can make this link and become this kind of informal mentor (Philip, 1998; Philip, 2000).

Techno Teenagers: a case study of an empowering approach to youth work

This case study (Forrest and Wood, 1999) illustrates the work of a particular youth project that sought to prevent harm to young people and encourage self respect, by offering the opportunity to develop their music and media interests and participate in a democratic process of programme planning. The project aimed to involve young people in decision making. The concept of empowerment was translated into the following practices:

- The formation of a youth advisory panel which brought together young people, workers and Community Education Centre management representatives.
- The introduction of the 'open meeting' i.e. an invitation to all young people to participate in the setting of the programme agenda for a 10 week block.
- The formation of a 'Rave Committee.' This was a group of teenagers elected by their peers to represent the interests of the rave music followers in the area.
- The introduction after a period of debate and argument of the 50% ruling. The Rave Committee must have at least 50% female membership.
- The 'looking back' meeting whereby the advisory panel reviewed the successes and failures of the previous 10 week programme.
- The decision to work with the girl friends of the main group of boys through a writing and magazine project.

The young people identified the main elements of the programme of work throughout the year. This became 'dj'ing', learning about techno music, organising monthly raves at the centre, forming discussion groups, publishing a magazine called *The Mastrick Magazine*, organising occasional outdoor residential weekends and specific sports events over the summer period.

Drugs issues and educational sessions were introduced when they grew out of the ongoing work with the young people. The interest in raves and techno music came from those young people who were travelling to the clandestine music events in the North East of Scotland at



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the time. Specialist organisations equipped to handle serious drugs and alcohol use were brought in to compliment the work done by youth workers. Advice work became a growing feature of the youth work as the young people sought help over financial matters, jobs, housing, breaking the law etc. It was significant that the project was able to attract older teenage girls into involvement in the magazine production and discussion groups.

The boys who met each other in the shopping precinct, originally identified as the group demanding more resources and attention from workers due to continually being 'moved on' by the police, became the music and dance organisers on the one hand and brought their girlfriends along as well. This piece of work allowed the girls to make more demands; to assert their rights to be more involved, having more of a say in the running of the project. As one young woman explained, "Now I'm on the committee, I want to put my own opinion over".

The Young Women Writers' Group

It is significant that *Sophie's World*, a mystery story set in the context of the history of Western philosophy, was, at one point, in the 1990s, one of the most popular books amongst young people in Europe. We found that young people were passionately interested in why the world is the way it is, according to their experience, but are rarely given the opportunity to philosophise. These are some of the questions posed in the first issue of *The Mastrick Magazine*⁴ by members of the writer's group:

"Why are we brought up the way we are? I mean we grow up, go to school, work, have kids and get married - why? I often wonder why life has gone past so quick and I wonder why we do things we regret later and why we have to take responsibility at a young age. I often wonder why life is the way it is and why it is so hard sometimes. Have you ever wondered why bad things happen to the kindest of people?"

These young people were angered by racism, pollution of the environment, the sudden death of some of their closest friends from drug taking and the local policing practice of

⁴ The Mastrick Magazine project was initiated by a group of older teenage girls living in Mastrick and attending the Community Education Centre during 1996. The project became the starting point for the development of the Mastrick Youth Café at the turn of the century.



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'moving them on'. The following were the main concerns they identified and wanted to discuss and write about:

- Coping with bereavement
- Spiritualism
- Their rights as young women to be treated with respect and equality
- Finding out more about 'green' issues
- How to complain about police behaviour

Conclusion

Acknowledgement of the interests and aspirations of young people is perhaps the greatest contribution to empowerment. In a world where education has become yet another commodity to be bought and sold on the open market (Smith, 2002) it is essential that we bring this new sense of urgency to the working relationship we establish between young people and ourselves as youth workers.

Freedom for children and young people is a daily struggle for basic rights and requires support for those young people, parents and professionals in the classroom, at home and in the youth projects who will have to defend basic services in the immediate future. In a multitude of small but significant ways youth workers can listen to children and young people, take their side and shift the unequal power relations that now underpin government and citizen.

In the first instance, it is imperative that in all youth work settings certain key values are explicit. This is necessary to avoid the manipulation of a form of empowerment that can have a controlling agenda and a setting devoid of challenge in terms of racism, gender issues, disability rights and sexuality. Thus, central to these values should be a commitment of autonomy, democracy and accountability for resources and the planning of a programme (Forrest 2010; Gilchrist, 2010). In this setting the process of dialogue and empowerment should reflect the interests of the general user of the club or project.



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One antidote to the process of privatisation, alienation and individualisation within contemporary youth work (Jeffs and Smith, 2002, Smith, 2002) is collective association, informal education and protest. We can assist this process by ensuring that our institutions are democratic and that our planning for engagement is participatory. It is imperative that our values of social justice equality and equity are paramount and that we are on the side of young people who want to inhabit their own space on street corners, youth clubs, commercial establishments, workplaces and schools. Many young people still want to change the world for the better. We should assist them in this endeavour. After all as one old philosopher now enjoying a resurgence of interest put it, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, but the point is to change it' (Marx and Engels, 1970).

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