



Are we really moving forward? Evaluating the impact of the national youth work strategy.

Mike Bell

In March 2007, the serving Labour Executive in the Scottish Parliament published a national youth work strategy entitled 'Moving Forward: a strategy for improving young people's chances through youth work'. The strategy outlined the Executives blueprint for youth work provision over a three-year period and was informed by over 3000 responses to a consultation exercise that preceded its publication. The framework received further support in 2007 when the newly elected SNP Government adopted it wholesale.

The strategy's launch came with significant resources, with £11m made available to youth work providers across the country to date. As a practitioner co-ordinating youth work provision in South East Edinburgh, I, like other colleagues, welcomed and benefited from this much needed funding boost. At the time, the youth and community work sector throughout the country was becoming aware of looming budget cuts to our traditional funding streams. Against this backdrop, colleagues were understandably relieved by the cash that came with the national strategy - too many of us faced the prospect of going out of business fast.

In hindsight however, perhaps we should all have been a bit more curious about the detail of the publication and its potential impact upon the youth work sector throughout Scotland: it is to this end, a critical evaluation, that the rest of this paper is devoted. I will argue that there are tensions deriving from the way in which youth work is framed and conceptualised within the strategy document that could have a negative impact upon the sector in future years.

The case is made that the new youth work strategy is used to promote the view that the primary benefit of youth work is as a means of engaging young people with the prevailing policy priorities of national government: youth work is not seen as a profession that is valuable in its own right or on its own terms, but as a model of practice – a means of



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

engagement - that can be of value to other professional groupings i.e. Careers Officers, School Teachers, Health Workers and Social Workers. I will argue that this view of youth work is at odds with the heritage and traditions upon which the sector typically draws, where youth work is seen as a means of promoting the values of association, empowerment and dialogue.

Moving Forward: a national youth work strategy

At 72 pages long, the national youth work strategy is broad-ranging and far reaching. Though it is light on detail in terms of the issues affecting young people, it does have a lot to say about the priorities that the service should address, as well as how the profession should be structured, resourced and regulated.

In terms of priorities, the focus starts off very general and uncontroversial. We are told on page 1 that the long-term vision for youth work is twofold:

- 1. all young people in Scotland are able to benefit from youth work opportunities which make a real difference to their lives; and*
- 2. a youth work sector equipped and empowered to achieve ongoing positive outcomes for young people now and in the future*

We are also given a taste of how important youth work practice has become to government, when it is noted on page four that ...

Youth work has a significant role to play in delivering our broad vision for Scotland's young people ...

Youth work has a major part to play in providing life-enhancing experiences for children and young people – and the learning and development opportunities it offers must be seen and valued as an integral part of what society provides for young people



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

Subsequently, we are informed on page 12 about the purposes that youth work should serve, which is to ...

... promote achievement by young people through facilitating their personal, social and educational development and enabling them to gain a voice, influence and place in society.

However, gradually the text is used to assert more of a specific agenda, when it is noted on page 14 that ...

Youth work must be fun but it needs to be more than that. It is also a unique means of engaging young people ...

Gathering momentum, it is noted in the next paragraph that ...

Youth work must take its place alongside other professions in delivering in a joined up way for young people. It must look outward and forward at how it can contribute to young people's development, whether on health policies, careers, or supporting young people to move onto education, employment or training ... Youth work can have a major role in growing local communities ... It can be particularly important in building intergenerational links ... It can also have a role in addressing national skill needs

Similarly, when noting the first specific outcome for youth work provision, it is explained on page 18 ...

The Outcome we want:

For the value, unique nature, and contribution of youth work to be recognised and reflected in a broad policy context, contributing to achieving wide-ranging positive outcomes for young people.



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

The Action we propose:

The Scottish Executive will ensure a better understanding of youth work and young people and the potential contribution of youth work across ministerial portfolios and departments and in delivering cross-cutting objectives. We will work with other policy makers and agencies to promote the role and methods of youth work and ensure that representatives of the youth work sector are involved in developing policies affecting young people where youth work has a potential role to play.

We will ask local authorities to take a similar approach, ensuring that decision makers not directly involved in delivering youth work are still aware of its role and benefits, not least in community planning activities and in provision of children's services, school education and wider services to help young people make successful transitions to adulthood and post-school education, training and employment.

Clearly there is an agenda being developed here: there are a number of assumptions and prescriptions within this text that could have quite a significant impact upon youth work provision in years to come, some of which are noted below ...

1. Youth work is seen as a 'role', a 'method'
2. The primary benefit of youth work and the primary role that youth work should play is 'as a means of engaging young people'
3. Youth Work has a role to play in the policy making process *across ministerial portfolios and departments*

The significance of each of these points is addressed in turn.



Youth Work as a role or method

Youth work has a long and nuanced history (Gilchrist, Jeffs & Spence 2003; Gilchrist, Jeffs & Spence 2006), but the work has been informed by distinctive values: as noted in the introduction to this text, this includes ideas such as, association, empowerment and dialogue. Though these concepts cannot be reduced to simple definitions, there are some basic features that characterize all three. In terms of youth work practice, these values are about the creation of safe and constructive social environments, where young people can come together collectively, enter into conversation and dialogue and learn about themselves, their community and society more generally (Batsleer 2008 & Sapin, 2009).

At a broader level, such ideas draw upon philosophical concepts such as, interdependence, equality and democracy. Such values have an obvious political nature to them, with young people viewed as citizens with rights, most notably the right to freedom of thought and expression and the right to live a life free from the shackles of poverty, oppression and discrimination. At this broader level, youth workers spend time supporting young people through educational processes which encourage them to assert their ideas and opinions to adults in positions of power and authority: they also advocate directly on behalf of young people through attendance and participation in relevant networks and forums.

The point to make then is that youth work is more than a role or a method, it is a professional practice which is irrevocably bound up by commitments to a distinctive philosophical value base. At times these kinds of commitments have led the sector to work hand-in-hand with governments and other welfare professions, at other times it has allowed youth workers to stand at a healthy distance, in opposition, to policy development and practice initiatives. The danger in viewing youth work simply as a role or a method is that it is stripped of this kind of history and purpose. Youth work becomes a technical function of government: a method by which to engage young people with policy priorities regardless of their relevance or value. In short, youth work becomes more controllable.

Youth Work as a means of engagement



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

The term ‘youth engagement’ appears to be used in two ways in the strategy: (1) as a model of service provision (2) as a method of involving young people in the creation of policy. This section is used to discuss and explore the former, with the latter being taken up in the next section.

Beyond the examples noted above, there is not a huge deal of effort put into describing or outlining how youth engagement operates as a model of service provision within the strategy document; however, there is a growing body of literature which has been written to critique these kinds of developments in England & Wales, where ‘youth engagement’, or ‘youth development’ as it is termed south of the border, has a longer history. These historical developments are instructive in helping us to understand why this model has become so important.

In England & Wales, youth work has undergone wholesale change: in 1999 the government published the *Learning to Succeed White Paper*, which they used to announce plans to set up a new multi-agency national youth service with the main aim of supporting detached and vulnerable young people to re-engage with learning and employment. The service, which later came to be named Connexions, was, in the main, designed to engage with young people who were seen as at ‘risk’ and who themselves were ‘risky’: perusing associated literature, it would appear that there is a number of life style indicators which would likely bring a young person to the attention of the Connexions agency, including, truancy, unemployment, drug and alcohol use/abuse, homelessness, care leavers and teenage pregnancy (Hogarth, L & Smith, D.I 2004).

Connexions has been operational since 2001 and there are three main aspects to its model of service provision, but the most pertinent to the considerations of this paper is the development of a new key worker service designed to support those who have been identified as being at ‘risk’ from disengaging completely and to help those who already have to re-engage (Hogarth, L & Smith, D.I 2004). Personal advisors operate to a three tier engagement model: (1) the provision of general advice and support to all young people at key life moments (2) the provision of in-depth support for those at risk of not participating



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

in education and employment (3) the provision of integrated and specialist support to those with complex and multiple needs (DfEE, 2000, p37). At the level of practice, Personal Advisor's perform a number of roles, including, mentor, counsellor and advice worker.

Though the Scottish Government's strategy does not come anywhere remotely near to setting up a Scottish version of Connexions, there are significant indicators within the publication that some aspects of the approach are seen as valuable and worth adopting. For example, youth work is to be targeted at the personal development of the most risky individuals, with a view toward returning them to world of employment and learning ...

it [youth work] can engage in positive activities young people who might otherwise become involved in anti-social behaviour, alcohol or drug misuse'

(p6)

For some youth work enhances lives that are already full. But for others, youth work can be the main means of personal development in their lives

(p14)

We remain clear that the purposes of youth work are ... to promote achievement by young people through facilitating their personal, social and educational development. ... The outcomes we seek from youth work are ... that young people become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens and that they make a successful transition to life after school, taking advantage of and sustaining opportunities in education, employment or training

(P12)

Whilst there have been apparent parity of perspective between politician's and policy makers more generally both north and south of the border, not everyone is convinced about this approach. Indeed, there have been a number of strong questions raised and critiques made in regard to the development of the Connexions agency: in the main, these centre



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

upon the view that it is completely at odds with the aspects of traditional youth work practice previously described. For example, there is no commitment to the principle or practice of association and the progressive kinds of learning and enquiry that such environments can foster: the Connexions service is purely about working with individuals and focusing their attention on life style choices and behavioural issues (Smith, 1999; Jeffs & Smith, 2002). Similarly, it is argued that there is very little commitment to empowerment: the Connexions service, it is argued, is primarily and solely about getting young people to re-engage with the world of work and learning and to fit in more generally: in this sense it is focused upon responsabilising young people, about making them explore the life style habits and choices which allegedly exclude them from the world of work - as opposed to supporting them to articulate their rights (ibid).

The particular focus upon young peoples behaviour and motivation as the source of their exclusion from the labour market is similarly at odds with a range of research that questions just how culpable young people really are for their predicament. For example, Furlong & Cartmel (1997) argue that youth unemployment is largely due to the collapse of the industrial labour market during the 1980s and its subsequent restructuring around notions of highly skilled, flexible and specialized employment opportunities, which left many young people struggling to make any kind of healthy or sustainable transition to adulthood. Similarly, Mizen (1999) argues that these issues have been compounded by 30 years of austere welfare policies that have been designed to aggressively restrict young peoples access to welfare provision.

The net effect of these developments, it is argued, is that rather than following the comparatively routine and stable pathways to adulthood that their parents and relatives were able to access (unionized, secure, skilled jobs; access to well resourced public services) and which supported them to live relatively independently, young people today follow more temporary, flexible and insecure transition pathways (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997): young people either live at home for a much longer period than their parents would have or they experience homelessness. They also experience significant and sustained periods of



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

unemployment; similarly they cannot afford to access recreation and leisure opportunities and they also face significant health risks (ibid).

Clearly then, there are significant issues at stake here: whilst I wouldn't go as far as Tony Jeffs & Mark Smith and argue that youth workers have no business taking forward youth engagement work. I think there are far too many vulnerable and alienated young people whose needs are so immediate that intensive one to one support is entirely appropriate. I do think that the model promoted through the Connexions agency and which may be replicated in Scotland to some degree, starts from the wrong place and is directed toward the wrong ends. Accordingly, I do think we need to think very carefully before we embark upon any form of engagement work: the following observations are my own attempt to gain some clarity on the issue ...

- Youth Engagement work needs to start from the recognition that vulnerable and excluded young people are not disengaged because of their own lifestyle choices and behaviours, instead, they are the unwitting victims of thirty years of significant and wholesale economic and welfare restructuring, over which they have no control or influence.
- Where a youth engagement methodology is taken up, it should not be seen from the perspective of pressuring young people to be more responsible, instead it should be seen as about encouraging them to assert their rights. This demands a committed form of practice and one that takes the worker beyond the neutral role of information and advice giver, to a place where the worker is prepared to perform the roles of ally and advocate, supporting young people to know what their rights are and how to access them. This involves taking sides and speaking *with* and, with their permission, *for* young people as they come up against the more authoritative aspects of state welfare provision.
- Youth Engagement work should never, ever be about shoe horning young people into low skilled, low paid flexible employment opportunities and training



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

programmes; instead, it should be about supporting them to access a range of general and specialist welfare services which will support them to live a more sustainable and independent life of their own choosing and on their own terms.

- Youth work must not be dominated by a youth engagement approach. In keeping with the heritage of the profession, youth workers need the time, space and necessary resources to encourage and foster learning in its broadest possible sense. Similarly, we need the space to support young people to critically enquire about the world they have inherited and how this is being shaped by policy and politics. This is particularly pertinent for young people who are detached and excluded, who have virtually no, if any, foothold in society. Whilst youth engagement work in its proper sense can achieve much in terms of supporting young people to address the symptoms of poverty and deprivation, it can do very little to help them address the causes.

Youth Engagement as Policy Development

As noted in the previous section, the term Youth Engagement is also associated with supporting young people to be involved in the policy making process. There are a number of points to make in this regard.

First, the number of policy areas which youth work professionals are expected to deliver upon has been inflated to the point of absurdity: health, careers, more choices – more chances, growing local communities, building intergenerational links, addressing national skill needs (p14): in all seriousness, there would need to be a ten fold increase in funding opportunities for the sector to engage in this kind of agenda.

Second, assessing the language used, it is hard to escape the feeling that we are being brought in at the tail end of the policy making process, with a responsibility for delivering young people into a pre conceived agenda: we are expected to make a *contribution* across *ministerial portfolios*; we are expected to get involved in *delivering cross cutting objectives*. A more convincing approach, and one that would sit more comfortably with the heritage



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

and traditions of youth work practice, would have been for youth workers to be given the task of engaging young people at the start of the policy making process, to support them to articulate the issues that are important to them and the kinds of services they need access to.

Finally, the main mechanism for involving young people in the policy making process which is mentioned in the strategy document is the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP). With all due respect to the efforts of young people and staff who work very hard to promote the work of the SYP, particularly in promoting the relevancy of the political process to young people, it has always been dogged by questions about how representative it is of the broad youth populace within Scotland: a fact which is confirmed by research published in 2005 by Youth Link Scotland, who surveyed 3178 young people throughout Scotland on a range of issues: their findings noted that 60% of 11-16 year olds felt that the Scottish Youth Parliament makes no difference at all to their lives, and this view was shared by 84% of 17-25 year olds (Machin, 2005).

This issue noted above is even recognized within the strategy document itself, when it is observed that ...

Consultation responses, particularly from young people, showed a disappointingly low level of awareness of the Scottish Youth Parliament in representing the views of young people in Scotland

(p59)

Similarly, the Scottish Youth Parliament has no powers whatsoever to influence policy; whilst politicians can and do consult with young people involved in the organization, they are under no obligation to alter policy in response to such opinion.

Taking all of these issues into account, it is hard to conclude anything other than the vision of youth work that is conceived within the strategy document is about the regulation of the political process as opposed to its extension.



Standing at the Crossroads – What future for Youth Work?

Mike Bell

Mike has been working in the Youth & Community Work sector for 12 years. Mike has extensive experience of working with young people experiencing crisis and vulnerability and has good knowledge of a range of practice based approaches, but in particular educational group work, one to one case work and streetbased outreach. Mike graduated from Edinburgh University in 2004 with an Honors Degree in Community Education and from the Open University in 2010 with a Masters Degree in Social Policy & Youth Justice.



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