



Ready, Steady, Race to the bottom! The dangers of youth work serving as a sector of the economy.

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This paper warns of the dangers of youth work serving as a sector of the economy by blindly creating a new generation of workers with the skills and attitudes needed to serve business. The dominant view in policy is that the growth of business and corporate profits is in turn beneficial to the welfare of society and its people. However there is growing evidence that the current business model exacerbates inequality and leads to the accumulation of wealth by a few, whilst deepening the poverty of many. Depression in wages, increases in job insecurity, a rise in short term and part time work, diminishing labour protection and growing unemployment are just some of the issues which characterise the modern job market. This is a situation known as ‘the race to the bottom’.

Working with young people to develop literacy, knowledge and skills can most certainly be of benefit if it is learning of the ‘liberating’ variety. As education can never be neutral, I argue that youth work must be critical of its practice and question its purpose. Otherwise we risk perpetuating the status quo without addressing the structures which fuels issues that young people face.

Edinburgh’s Children’s and Young People’s Plan voices a commitment for young people to be free from the effects of poverty and inequalities. The plan describes that this will be achieved through the improvement of youth literacy and increased numbers of school leavers entering employment, further education or training (City of Edinburgh Council 2008). This view is also reflected by the Scottish Government (2006) who has linked economic productivity and competitiveness with objectives of tackling poverty and disadvantage. According to our government, ‘economic growth is the single most powerful way of reducing poverty’ (Department for International Development 2005:43). But there is a problem with this situation, namely that there is mounting evidence that the current market structure contributes to rising inequality and poverty rather than diminishes it.



Youth work as a subsector of the economy

The world of economics and the world of youth work may at first seem very distant. But they are more closely entwined that you would expect. Education is a crucial area of attention for business, as in order to maximise their productivity they require a skilled and flexible workforce. Large multinational companies (MNCs) have huge political power. In the top 100 economies worldwide, MNC's outnumber nation states (Institute of Policy Studies 2005). As Held et al (1999) has argued, MNC's have become the most dominant global institutions and the dominant forces driving market conditions in the modern world. There are a number of reasons for this, but at the forefront is that modern technology, such as communications and transport has meant that they can be choosy as to where to locate their business and if they don't get the conditions they desire, they can move (or threaten to move) elsewhere. This has created competition between countries to bring in business, which in turn creates jobs. By using their geographical flexibility to their advantage, they can play governments off against one another in their drive forever increasing profits and in doing so pressure governments to provide labour, social, economic and regulatory conditions which best serves their needs. This makes policy decisions sensitive to 'market sentiment' (Leys 2003:2) and instead of the economy being embedded in social relations, social relations become embedded in the economic system with an effect on every field of public policy, including that of education.

In this way, education then becomes a 'subsector of the economy' (McLaren 1999:20) as a means to entice business and maximise 'national competitive advantage' (Lima 2006:123). We just have to look at the Scottish Government's strategy to Reduce the Proportion of Young People not in Education, Employment or Training (NEATs) (Scottish Government 2006) which describes 'the current *stock* [italics added] of young people' not in education, training or employment as standing 'in the way of individuals and society achieving optimum economic productivity'.

This scenario has led to youth work being criticised as acting as an 'instrument of economic policy', where young people are developed to 'learn for a living' and serve the economy



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(Foley 1999:76). In this sense, poverty and inequality become a problem of ‘individual deficit’ to be overcome by working on the young people without being critical of the status quo and how the current market structure exacerbates both poverty and inequality. Contrary to the notion that ‘a rising tide raises all boats’ (which is the dominant view that economic growth is good for everyone), there is mounting evidence that the current business model (of free trade) is exacerbating inequality rather than diminishing it. As the United Nations has found, ‘economic growth and income generation as a development strategy is ineffective. It leads to the accumulation of wealth by a few and deepens the poverty of many’ (UN 2005a:12). The UN describes the foremost root cause of this trend as being policies of liberalisation, in other words the effects of free and unhindered market practices.

The race to the bottom

The problem with business is that it doesn’t take into account concerns of human welfare and as Bakan (2005) argues, it is programmed to exploit all it can in the pursuit of profit. Cost/benefit analysis, which is the weighing of costs against benefits, is at the very heart of the way business operates which compels them to remove obstacles that get in their way. Regulations that limit their freedom to exploit people and the natural environment are such obstacles, and corporations have fought with considerable success over the past few decades to remove them. This is what causes the ‘race to the bottom’.

In a competitive market, sales generally go to the competitor who offers the lowest price. This is also true of nation states as they try to sell themselves to business. The relocation of business overseas is now a common occurrence with call centres in India and manufacturing in China just two of the more common examples. The policies of overseas governments and the experience of overseas workers have a direct bearing on conditions in the UK as current law states that shareholder value is a company’s main concern: which means that the pursuit of profit is their number one priority (Bakan 2005). Governments of Nations then find themselves competing to attract big business and the promise of jobs and investment. But as is the nature of the relentless drive for ever increasing profits, more is wanted for less. The result is a ‘downward levelling’ of environmental, labour and social conditions



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(Brecher & Costello 1998:25). Whilst the wealth of the richest in our society has risen, the majority of people at the lower end have seen a depression in wages, an increase in job insecurity, a rise in short term and part time work, diminishing labour protection and growing unemployment. Other aspects that have been affected by this trend also include diminishing social security protection, health care and the protection of our environment (UN 2005b) (War on Want 2009).

The effects of the race to the bottom have now become so critical and widespread that the European Commission has set up an 'Adjustment Fund' in a bid to mitigate against some of the decline in employment terms and conditions and the large scale redundancies caused by the way business currently operates (European Commission 2009): however this fund is deemed to be wholly inadequate (War on Want 2009). Unemployment is on the rise and is particularly high amongst young people where Europe-wide it stands at more than one in seven of those aged under 25. There is also an increasing pay gap between men and women with statistics showing that women earn 22.6% less than their male counterparts (Sparrow 2009). Couple this with the situation of an above average percentage of minority ethnic children living in poverty (Policy Studies Institute 2003) and we see other factors such as race and gender coming into play.

As Faber and McCarthy (2003) have highlighted, the social and environmental costs of corporate activities are not evenly distributed: communities with few resources and little political power, in other words the poor and the marginalised, are much more likely to experience the negative effects. Structural issues in relation to race, class and gender have a profound impact on the experiences and life chances of young people, and these are well documented and widely known. What is less well known is how an understanding of the race to the bottom warns us of the dangers of blindly serving business without being critical of the nature of the world of work.

I am not suggesting that the problem is business, work or trade in itself, nor that we should return to the dark ages or take to the caves. The root of the problem is the current structure of business, where concepts of 'market value' supersede those of 'social value'. Notions of



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human rights, social justice, liberty and freedom have come to mean the unrestricted functioning of the free market (Hertz 2001). This is a situation where government intervention, regulation and even the welfare state have been attacked as unjust, unfair and as a barrier to entrepreneurial endeavour. Even the universal right to healthcare has been branded as ‘evil’ by free market organisations (Clark 2009).

This concept views inequality and poverty as ‘just deserts’ where people have chosen their place in society or through the result of not being sufficiently productive, as ‘social justice is whatever is delivered by the market’ (Harvey 1993:100). This view neglects structural constraints, ignores the evidence of the ‘race to the bottom’ and blames the victims for choosing to be poor, marginalised and unequal (Gray 2003). As Shaw and Martin have argued, poverty is structurally created and sustained as a direct consequence of the operations of international capital and the state’s role in securing its interests. By understanding this we can see how what are really ‘public issues’ have been translated into ‘personal troubles’ (Shaw & Martin 2000:407).

Education can never be neutral

Top down youth work strategies state that Youth Work “must evolve to reflect the lives and needs of young people” 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” (Scottish Executive 2007: 12). In order to be relevant to young people in today’s society and to truly reflect their lives and needs, we must be critical of being immersed in the image of youth as the problem: otherwise professional practice becomes concerned with dealing with and solving perceived problems that young people present to society rather than making a real attempt to work with young people to create a more socially just and equal world.

Youth Workers must be critical of their practice, of what they are teaching young people and also why they are teaching it. Otherwise they may simply perpetuate the status quo without addressing the structures which fuel issues of poverty and inequality that young people face. Education can never be neutral, as neutrality perpetuates the status quo. Thus education



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either works to liberate young people or domesticate them by adapting them to the way things are. The development of literacy, knowledge and other skills can most certainly benefit young people if it is learning of the ‘really useful’ variety (Martin & Rahman 1999:3).

As Martin (2006) has argued, education is always a key resource in the broader struggle for social change. A liberating approach to youth work assumes that the young people have something to offer society, that they are not merely a problem to be managed. It is critical of the status quo and is committed to progressive social and political change from the grassroots in the struggle for a more just and egalitarian social order: to challenge inequality, exploitation and oppression through the democratic notion of popular participation in the running of our society. At its heart, a liberating approach works with young people to develop their critical awareness of the world they live in. It aims to give them the space and support to identify issues, explore alternatives, build their confidence and stimulate action.

Chains of existence

There is a great deal of feeling that there is no alternative to the modern business model. But the current structure has been created through design. It has been constructed and can thus be changed. The power that young people hold may be limited: in that little can be done at the grassroots level regarding employment issues. However a liberating approach to youth work gives them a voice, shows that their views do count, that alternatives do exist and that some change is possible. Adding in the linking of the micro to the macro also enables them to see how small changes at the local level can impact on the larger picture and that acting collectively strengthens the ability in making their voices heard and ensuring that decision makers take some notice (Mullender & Ward 1995). This gives young people some control over their lives and ensures that they are valued as young people in contrast to merely being prepared for adulthood and to fit into the job market.

But this is easier said than done I hear you cry. This is very true, but it is not impossible. One of the ways to approach this is by exploring how we are all connected through a ‘chain of existence’ (Harvey 1993:110). Simply put, this means that the act of buying a product connects us to the experiences of the workers who created it. Even something as simple as



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following the life of a cocoa bean can become a hugely educational experience. Drawing out the experiences of workers from planting and growing to transporting, production and distributing it as chocolate bars brings with it a multitude of issues to explore. Concepts such as the race to the bottom may be new to youth work and it may be difficult to know where to start with it. This can be overcome by drawing from the knowledge and expertise of others, such as the organisations involved with the Trade Justice Movement, who can share their knowledge in a myriad of ways (from facilitating workshops, providing youth resources or simply by having access to information on their websites).

It was the humble cocoa bean that became the starting point for a group of young people in Edinburgh when they created a mural depicting how people across the globe are impacted upon by processes of trade and consumption. This drew out concepts not only of Fair Trade and Environmentalism, but also of children's and employment rights. The youth workers were not alone in this project. There were many avenues of expertise to be drawn from, such as Edinburgh's Peace & Justice Centre, Trade Unions, local artists and the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child posters. What followed is only an example of how a project such as this can be approached.

Each part was carefully planned but the inspiration and direction was organic and directed by the young people. Wanting to know more about the issues, we tapped into the 'Alternative G8' events being held at Moray House in 2005 when the G8 was being held at Gleneagles. A day was spent attending workshops where they had fun whilst exploring how ordinary people do have some power to make change. They also attended a workshop where they met a trade unionist who had left Columbia after receiving death threats whilst being employed at a bottling plant for a very well known brand of fizzy drink. Vowing to never touch this particular brand of cola again, the young people wanted to take things further. Linking together the issues they had explored along with their interests in clothes and fashion, a fashion show was born. They created new clothes from recycled materials that they collected, looked at issues of sweatshops, employment rights and child labour and produced a series of DVD clips to be projected on stage to share information with the



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audience. Some of them took to Princes Street with microphones and interviewed the public about what they knew about the products they wore and consumed.

This became part of an interview for a local radio broadcast where the young people shared what they had discovered and explored. One of the young people went on to write an article for a local newsletter and presented it as a speech at the organisations AGM. What had started simply as the creation of a mural had become a much larger project which lasted a full year. The young people chose the level of their involvement and dipped in and out of the various elements that made up the project.

In the end, whether the project was big or small, the aim was to provide tools so that the young people could explore the chains of existence, stimulate their critical awareness, have a safe space to think things through, understand them and consider forms of action. The building of their confidence and ability to take action for themselves were seeds for them to draw on in the future in order to tackle issues at the personal, local, national and global levels. This fits very closely with the aims of 'global youth work' as defined by the Development Education Association (Aubrey 2009) which seeks young people's participation in bringing about change in the strive for equality and justice. Global youth work has been criticised for its tendency to concentrate on the saving of 'poor souls' in the 'developing' world and youth workers have argued that young people living in deprived circumstances have enough to deal with without worrying about the plight of others far away (Aubrey 2009). Buying Fair Trade and environmentally friendly products is the common view of how global inequality can be addressed, but this was not an option for our young people due to the higher cost of such products which they couldn't afford.

In order to be relevant to the young people we work with I argue that youth work must gain an understanding and be critical of how the nature of business exacerbates exploitation, inequality and injustice. The race to the bottom is a consequence of business and economic practices which links the fate of young people and their communities across the globe. Contrary to the dominant view in policy that what is good for business and the economy is good for the welfare of the people, the evidence of the 'race to the bottom' paints a very



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different picture. Youth work must thus be careful that it does not simply become a sector of the economy which blindly serves the needs of business. The development of young people's skills does have its place if it is used in the development of 'really useful' knowledge: where young people can be provided with a safe space to explore their world, to identify issues, develop their critical awareness, build their confidence, have a voice and move forward together in action.

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