

The voluntary principle in youth work: ‘unreliable’ for whom? A response to Coburn and Gormally

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Bernard Davies is a key figure in the development of youth work in Britain in the last forty years of the twentieth century. His most recent publication is 'Austerity, Youth Policy and the Deconstruction of the Youth Service in England' (2019) Policy Press.

Mainly out of a concern that what results might come over as self-defensive, I have approached this piece very hesitantly. However, Annette Coburn and Sinead Gormally's contribution to the Spring 2019 issue of Concept¹ clearly poses much more than personal challenges – for example on how well I made (or did not make) the case for ‘the voluntary principle’ in my ‘Youth Work Manifesto’.² A response is needed in its own right – and in the current ideological and political moment is urgent – to what I take as their core argument: that because ‘the context ... has changed’ and ‘new roles are emerging’ we need to ‘consider an alternative position (to voluntary participation) as a means of strengthening policy and practice development’.

The urgency stems from the current debate at least in England on the impacts on young people's lives over the past decade of the huge cuts in state support for youth work facilities they attend voluntarily. For many in power, however, such provision remains wholly unreliable for meeting their dominant demand for assured pre-defined ‘hard’ outcomes with those labelled ‘vulnerable’ and ‘at risk’. With that debate thus still heavily problem-focused on NEETs, knife crime and teenagers' mental health pressures, many of the policy solutions which emerge could again end up devaluing or completely denying key distinguishing features of youth work. Particularly at risk would be voluntary engagement - a potentially crucial tipping factor for young people's initial exploration of their local club or project and perhaps especially for those most alienated from the adult-defined and directed institutions which dominate so much of their lives.

Though disagreeing fundamentally with Coburn and Gormally's main conclusion, I nonetheless share a number of their starting propositions. I too see it as important to ‘seek a more inclusive understanding of education’ by challenging what they call ‘the hegemonic norm of education as schooling’. I too would wish to avoid ‘pathologising discourses’ which ‘blame the individual rather than the structure’ for young people's presumed deficits; and that we help do this by explicitly ‘asserting youth work as education’. As they note, I too have acknowledged the positive contributions which those trained and identifying as youth workers can make to such educational efforts beyond youth work settings – contributions which can certainly include ‘creating effective spaces for ... conversational learning’, ‘transform(ing) social problems into educational issues’ and ‘working across disciplines and contexts’.

Nor – of course – would I deny that ‘claims to be open access provision does not guarantee that those directly involved will uphold the values and principles of a distinctive youth worker identity’. Or disagree that this work – as unfortunately some so-called ‘participation’ or ‘youth voice’ practice does - can end up ‘simply socialising young people into existing dominant power structures without any critical reflection on the potential benefits and negative impacts of these structures on young people’. I am also struck by their agreement that what they call ‘bespoke “employability” work’ cannot ‘substitute for open access youth work’ – something which they acknowledge as especially true ‘... where sanctions may be applied for non-attendance as the young people in these situations have very little power’.

Indeed, it is in part because they are so up-front in taking this latter view that I find much of the case they make for limiting if not abandoning the commitment to young people’s voluntary participation confusing and diversionary. For them, what appears to be a – perhaps the - crunch issue is that insistence on this ‘can reduce possibilities for youth work in inter-professional and collaborative contexts’ and thereby its chance of offering ‘an alternative perspective based on values of equality and social justice’. When, however, some of the assumptions embedded in this premise are unpacked, their validity is at least contestable.

One of these, surely, is the implication that such ‘alternative perspectives’ are not already operating within non-youth work educational provision – that as other youth practitioners have not already found and committed themselves to these ways of working they need to be introduced to them by youth workers. Which makes me want to ask: did Coburn and Gormally, I wonder, watch any of the BBC series ‘School’ in which – to take just one illustration – a member of staff (a teacher) struggled over weeks and possibly months to support a young woman terrified of going into an exam room? Or the programmes tracing how, in very fraught circumstances, Gareth Malone (a choir leader) worked in the school most directly affected by the Grenfell Tower fire, in the process helping to build one young man’s confidence to sing solo?

Clearly youth work-trained staff can and often do add to the skilled implementation of values like equality and social justice and to ‘negotiating relationships that underpin the development of powerful learning environments’. However in making the case for youth work practice, don’t we need to be extremely careful not to seem to be claiming some exclusive understanding or indeed possession of those values and skills which are already being endorsed and applied?

If Coburn and Gormally’s case is that commitment to ‘the voluntary principle’ needs to be loosened in order to clear the way for more youth workers to operate in schools, prisons and hospitals, then for me other implicit questions require explicit attention. Such as: Where does the power lie in advocating for this change and where will it lie in deciding that it should happen? Their article gives significant attention to ‘the

foundational need ... to make the voice of young people more influential'; to 'practice that is developed through purposeful dialogue with young people'; to a 'youth work curriculum ...driven by young people as "experts" in their own lived experience'. Where then, I feel bound to ask, is that voice, where are those experts, in this dialogue? To what extent have they contributed to formulating the highly provocative question in the article's title suggesting that the voluntary principle may 'no longer be reliable'? Reliable for whom? For those up to a million young people who since 2010, I calculate, may well have lost their local open access youth work facilities? Or for 'professionals' now being forced – usually by ruthless top-down 'austerity' decisions - to find roles in other settings? All of which leads me to ask: Where does their concern to defend 'a profession' under attack – indeed under threat – stop, and their defence start of a practice which so many young people have in the past voluntarily opted into?

For me, any debate on the need for youth work facilities based on the user's freedom to engage must begin and remain firmly focused on what young people are prioritising. And given that in 2013, when the cuts were already well under way, there was evidence that up to 30 per cent of 10-15 year olds and 370,000 16-25 year olds were still using or testing out some form of youth work provision,³ then just as, as a citizen's right, I have a state pension, why also as a citizen's right should young people not go on having the option of meeting youth workers in, say, a local youth club or LGBT project or indeed on the street corners where they hang out?

Coburn and Gormally do at one point distance themselves from 'the neo-liberal project' with its 'marketisation of education' and the penetration into schools of 'commercially-run organisations'. In their conclusion, however, as a rationale for the changes they advocate, this overall context is appears only as 'a persistently changing environment'. By adopting this apparently ideologically neutral terminology they mask what for youth work has been one crucial reality: that, far from being driven by commitments to equality and social justice, this 'environment' has been and is still shaped by values which give little if any endorsement to a practice which can offer no guarantees that it will turn young people into the 'resilient', 'self-reliant' and indeed 'happy' individuals it requires.

Only when I can safely separate the case against 'the voluntary principle' from the continuing intrusions into national and local policy making of this ideology and its values will I be confident that such a 'debate' won't just result in more damage for young people.

¹ Annette Coburn and Sinead Gormally, 2019, 'Youth Work Education: Is the Voluntary Principle no Longer Reliable in Defining Youth Work', *Concept*, Vol 10, No 1, Spring 2019, available at <http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/2998/3984?fbclid=IwAR3AJE22wnFiDQSxnSOOfvW0yfuyH5dT-RWw4snkhzyrQEfdjTTKcTOCJc>

² *Youth and Policy*, No 88, Summer 2005; *Youth and Policy*, No 114, May 2015

³ NCVYS, 2013, *Youth Report*, p2