Working with
Young People

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Policy, Practice and Research in Work with Young People

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In recent years there have been significant shifts in the landscape of work with young people. These have followed changes in policy, in social and economic conditions and in the knowledge base through which we understand young people. This chapter examines some of these changes, drawing attention to their implications for practice and practitioners. In particular it points up the tendency to view young people as 'at risk', either to themselves or others, as a driver for changes in policy and practice.

Introduction

The past ten years have seen significant expansion and change in work with young people. The field once occupied predominantly by youth services, social work and education now contains a wider network of agencies that seek to intervene in a young person's life. A qualified youth worker today is one who can be called upon to make a contribution to a number of agencies and organisations that, in many cases, did not exist ten years ago. In statutory youth offending partnerships and crime prevention teams, they work to prevent and reduce the reoccurrence of youth crime. In information, advice and guidance services, they undertake work to reduce the number of young people excluded from education, training or employment. Through various health initiatives, they work preventatively in reducing the health risks that young people face. Positive activities and structured programmes of leisure, once the cornerstone of youth work, persist, but in a wide variety of contexts provided by a range of statutory, voluntary and private agencies. This broad range of work with young people frequently takes place in multi-agency contexts, where

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the disciplinary boundaries between professions are increasingly characterised as porous. As a result, the professional identity of a youth, health or social worker is under challenge as partnership working becomes more commonplace.

Many of the policy initiatives that have underpinned these changes have done so on the basis of a desire to improve things for all children and young people. In England, the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) framework offered five laudable outcomes for children and young people: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being (DfES, 2003). Similarly, the ambitions of the overarching *Youth Matters* and *Aiming High for Young People* strategies indicated both a desire to empower young people in the delivery of positive activities and for them to access high quality support in terms of advice and guidance (DfES, 2005; HM Treasury/DCSF, 2007). More recently the coalition government's Positive for Youth policy (https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/DFE-00198-2011.pdf) promotes similar aspirations for young people's development, though its strategy for achieving them is rather different. For example, it proposes:

> a common goal of young people having a strong sense of belonging, and the supportive relationships, strong ambitions, and good opportunities they need to realise their potential.

It specifically supports the value of young people's voices being heard and taken notice of:

> Young people have a right to have their views taken into account in all decisions that affect their lives. We must give them a stronger voice and celebrate their positive contribution and achievements.

And it aims to work through collaboration between government departments, councils, schools, charities and businesses. These positive messages are also evident at a European level where youth policy is governed by a commitment to advocating youth citizenship, promoting better participation and listening to the voice of young people (Williamson, 2009).

However, such developments also invite wide-ranging criticism. The dominant message about young people is one of ambivalence: they are to be protected and improved through increased intervention, but society must be protected from some of them. They are to be active participants in public life, yet are increasingly excluded from public spaces through dispersal and curfew measures. They are held up as responsible for making decisions, yet are often characterised as lacking the necessary skills to exercise this responsibility in an acceptable way. All of which results in young people being labelled in neat, dichotomous ways that do not necessarily reflect the complexity of young people's real lives and circumstances.

At the same time as seeking to expand the range of work with young people, policy has also become more prescriptive, specifying how this work should be done and introducing a wide range of targets to be met by agencies delivering it. Practitioners are increasingly required to demonstrate how their work results in accredited learning outcomes for young people. These targets are underpinned by an espoused commitment to evidence-based practice, though it is sometimes difficult to see the

value of the evidence chosen. This is all the more surprising given the extent to which research and wider theory has increased understandings of young people over the past decade. The relationship between this growing body of research, much of it focused on young people, and the definitions and approaches found in policy is clearly not as strong as it could be.

Developments in theory and research

Research studies of youth and work with young people have produced different understandings, not only of young people's lives, but of 'education, family, the media, popular culture, (un)employment transitions, the life course, risks and so on' (Kelly, 2003: 167). Despite this expansion in knowledge about young people, exactly what is meant by 'youth' is still open to question (see Hine, 2009). A central concept in traditional definitions is the notion of it being a stage in life between childhood and adulthood. But more recent sociological perspectives have shown that the period in the life course that is defined as 'youth' is as much a social construction as it is a period of individual change. Mizen defines youth as a 'socially determined category' (Mizen, 2004: 5) and in this respect it is little use to rely solely on individual biological markers as a frame for understanding youth. What this 'social turn' tells us is that the cultural, social and political contexts in which young people grow up will invariably shape definitions of what is childhood, adolescence and adulthood.

Studies of childhood show it as a similarly contested and socially constructed period of the life course (Foley et al., 2001; James and James, 2004). Like youth, childhood 'cannot be regarded as an unproblematic descriptor of the natural biological phase' (James and James, 2004: 13). The experiences of a child growing up in the 1990s compared with that of those today will vary dramatically. Further complexity arises in any cross-cultural comparison of childhood, especially in the values ascribed to certain definitions of childrearing practices as compared to 'Western notions of what all children should aspire to' (Sanders, 2004: 53). Such perspectives open up a challenge to claims of a neutrally defined 'normal' childhood since 'childhood as a social space is structurally determined by a range of social institutions and mechanisms' (James and James, 2004: 213). These institutions and mechanisms reflect the dominant cultural and social adult expectations of childhood, either in response to the individual and collective behaviours of children or in the wide variety of macro determinates that influence the wider structure of society (James and James, 2004).

Adulthood is also subject to social categorisation. What is meant precisely by adulthood is highly contested. Economic indicators would suggest full and continuous participation in the economy and the acquisition of property. Social indicators include the formation of stable family units, characterised by the reproduction and socialisation of the next generation of children. Civil indicators would suggest political and civic participation. All of these claims though can be subject to dispute. For instance, if full economic participation and property acquisition are indicators of responsible adulthood, are we to conclude that those who engage in further and higher education are not behaving as responsible adults?

What we can say with some certainty is that young people in late modern societies are characterised as leading immensely complex and fragmented lives. Their social identities are subjected to far-reaching, diverse and interconnected influences, many of which have not been experienced by previous generations. These new challenges include changing macro forces arising from globalisation and the risk society (which now operate together with longstanding issues of social stratification relating to class, gender, race, disability, sexuality, and so on).

Two strands of recent research are worthy of exploration here since they have direct implications for the significant changes in work with young people over the past ten years. The first examines expanding knowledge about youth transitions in a markedly changing and complex world. The second reviews the interplay of risk and resilience in young people's lives.

Changing, complex and extended transitions

Young people are frequently referred to as being in a state of transition, of moving between the life stages of childhood and adulthood: a stage termed adolescence or 'youth'. Age boundaries are often applied to this stage and are embedded in legislations related to education, voting rights and marriage, but in the modern Western world a range of economic and social indicators of adulthood are primary signifiers of the transition. In the discussion above, the idea that childhood and adulthood are problematic concepts was put forward. In any discussion around transition as a journey, one perhaps must accept some sort of a destination. For Coleman et al., adolescence is 'best understood as a complex transition between the states of childhood dependence and adult independence' (2004: 227). The extensive study of this transition period has provoked much recent empirical and theoretical interest, not least because of the complex changes associated with the risk society. Such research has been useful in considering:

- The interaction between personal capacity, biology and personality ('agency') and the systems and structures that influence young people ('structure').
- The ways in which institutions, social policies and systems intervene within a key stage of the life course.
- The ways in which other problems or situations emerge, particularly at the point of transition from education to employment. This is of particular interest to policy makers, often concerned with the interconnectedness of 'social exclusion'. (Bynner, 2001: 6)

While there has perhaps always been a great deal of confusion over what constitutes arrival at adulthood (Coleman and Warren-Adamson, 1992), transitions that were once understood to be linear are now recognised as fluid, changing and increasingly without a fixed end-point (Dwyer and Wyn, 2001). Consequently, young people growing up in the modern world 'face new risks and opportunities' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 8) perhaps only glimpsed by previous generations. It certainly makes one's own reflections on childhood in many cases redundant.

Regarded as 'an important phase in the life cycle' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 34), the transition from education to employment is one such example. Pathways from

post-16 education are now beset by a range of further training opportunities, increased uptake at higher education and new uncertainty in traditional, skilled and unskilled labour (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Government recognition that the nature of the labour market has shifted towards a 'knowledge economy' ultimately means that more young people are required to attend further and higher education and training for longer periods. Indeed, at the time of writing, government policy for England and Wales is to raise the statutory school leaving age from 16 to 18 by 2015. One consequence of fragmented employment patterns and extended education is the changing relationship that young people have with their immediate families. In the UK, for instance, extended periods of financial dependency on parents and carers may mean home ownership takes place increasingly later on in the life course.

A key indicator for arrival at 'adulthood' is the shift from dependence on parents and family to independent living, including obtaining employment, forming a relationship and family, and moving into accommodation. Research by Bynner (2005) shows that across Europe there is a trend towards the achievement of the markers of adulthood coming at a later age now than previously, as the transition from childhood to adulthood becomes extended. His research also draws attention to the different experiences of young people in different socio-economic groups: '… over the 24-year period examined, the most dominant feature was growing polarization between the advantaged and the disadvantaged' (Bynner, 2005: 377). Involvement in extended education and training delays the onset of employment for some, but rates of such participation are lower for the more disadvantaged, with higher levels of early parenthood and early entry into work.

The focus on the notion of transition is accompanied by the view that young people are adults in the making, and thus do not have the awareness or competencies of adults. This view is informed by the dominant developmental perspectives of childhood presented by psychologists such as Piaget and Inhelder (1969). Children are seen to develop adult attributes gradually over their early and adolescent years in an additive and linear fashion, with normative age bandings identified as significant for the acquisition of particular competencies. It is argued that recent times have seen significant changes in young people's transitions, because the nature of the world in which they live has changed dramatically (e.g. Bynner, 2005; Spence, 2005). In this new world young people have greater opportunity but less certainty about their futures, requiring them to be more self-aware, flexible and responsive to changing social and economic conditions (Beck, 1992). This instability and fluidity in social and economic conditions has meant that transitions can be more difficult for young people to achieve and that this transitional phase of life is becoming longer and more complex (Valentine, 2003), though, as noted above, these changes have not affected all young people in the same way, with those from disadvantaged backgrounds tending to have different patterns of transition than those from more privileged backgrounds (Bynner, 2005).

Young people, risk and resilience

> Nowhere is the tension between the need to prevent risk and the necessity of learning to manage and take calculated risks more apparent than in the process of growing up from childhood to adulthood. (Thom et al., 2007: 1)

Certainly, young people are leading lives of increasing uncertainty and 'heightened risk' (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 8), an idea located within the now well rehearsed framework of the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992). Life is literally prone to risks that once did not exist and 'people are seen to both cause risks and be responsible for their minimization' (Lupton, 2006: 12). Whether these risks are the consequence of seemingly uncontrollable forces (such as global warming) or understood within the more localised or personalised experiences of the population (health-related risky behaviours such as smoking, for instance), the overwhelming consequence is an increased feeling of insecurity and a desire for risk prevention and protection (Beck, 1992; Kemshall, 2002; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). This 'culture of caution' (Thom et al., 2007) leads us ultimately to see risk through a negative lens.

The association of 'youth' with 'risk' is prominent in relation to young people's social activities and debates around youth welfare, criminal justice, employment and sexuality. The expanding knowledge base about young people's personal and social risks is driven by research that gives increasing attention to young people as problems: sexual behaviour (Hoggart, 2007); substance misuse and 'binge' drinking, with grand but contested claims about alcohol misuse (see France, 2007: 137–138); and the links between truancy and long-term social exclusion (Social Exclusion Unit, 1998) are just three examples. This concern with risky behaviour drives a desire to predict it and stop it, using the idea of 'risk factors': literally what key determinants impact upon whether young people will grow up as integrated members of society, or as somehow deviant (Hayes, 2002). This growing body of work seeks to understand 'protective factors' and the idea of 'resilience' to address the question: what capacities do young people 'need' in order to ward off risk? Resilience is not simply located at the level of individual agency but is increasingly seen as a cultural and structural concept. Particular approaches to building resilience through community youth development (Perkins, 2009) and the building of social capital (Boeck, 2009) demonstrate the importance of strategies which acknowledge and work with the social contexts in which young people are growing up, rather than viewing young people only as sites of individual (in)capacity.

Developments in policy

Throughout history, youth policy has responded to different political, public and social imperatives, since 'youth has always been under the microscope and of central concern to adults and the state' (France, 2007: 1). Even in times of economic austerity and the closure of many local authority youth services in England, politicians of all major political parties have expressed concern about the dangers of young people not engaging in education and training, with consequences for their future employment prospects, and their involvement in crime, drug use and teenage pregnancy. The question of how to engage young people as socially and economically productive citizens is beset by a curious mix of anxiety, fear, hope and aspiration. Key themes in policy development over the past ten years include the prominence of

risk-based social policy over traditional welfarist models. This includes an increasing emphasis on fostering conditions that promote 'self-reliance' and 'responsibility'. For young people in particular, there has been an increase in strategies designed to ward off social exclusion through the use of early intervention strategies. In some cases, the preoccupation with risk has led to a widening of the criminal justice net (Yates, 2009). Services that were not traditionally classed as within the criminal justice arena find themselves increasingly contributing to outcomes related to the reduction of the risk of offending.

Dealing with young people for what they might become

In any welfare system, resources are prone to economic rationalisation, and targeting offers a politically attractive option for addressing the most pressing social problems (Kemshall, 2002). The argument suggests that the more entrenched a difficulty becomes, the more costly and less effective interventions become. So policy responds by seeking to address early warning signs: the truancy, rather than the long-term exclusion from school; the cigarette smoking rather than the diseases that plague the individual in later life; the healthy eating of children in schools rather than the health consequences of obesity. The approach is often argued as common-sensical: if it is known that someone is more likely to do X, if they are displaying Y, then surely one should intervene? As former Prime Minister Tony Blair observed:

> Where it's clear that children are at risk of being brought up in disadvantaged homes where there are multiple problems, then instead of waiting until the child goes off the rails we should act early enough to prevent that. (Blair, 2006, cited in *The Guardian*)

This emphasis on risk factors and precaution have ultimately led us towards a focus on the potential futures of young people via targeted policy and away from universal, open access welfare that deals with problems in the present (France, 2008). Risk factors serve as 'targets' helping to identify 'populations at risk' (Schoon and Bynner, 2003).

Early intervention is realised through a number of policy measures. All children and young people have access to universal education and health care, with minimum standards in both. But those children and young people who embody certain risk factors face greater levels of state intervention. Families in the most deprived communities in Britain are the targets of specialist, multi-disciplinary Children and Family Centres that seek to address the interconnected problems of health, education, child development and parenting. In criminal justice, the expansion of programmes of structured activity and the development of youth prevention services are targeted at those areas with higher crime rates in the hope that such programmes will divert potential offenders. Similarly, those young people Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) may find themselves subject to a raft of initiatives such as alternative curricula and dedicated personal advisers, both on compulsory and voluntary terms. The last ten years have seen a prioritisation of engagement in education, in whatever new forms it takes hold, including most recently through

private enterprise seeking to offer alternative qualifications for those children most at risk of exclusion.

From entitlement to conditionality

A key theme in social policy has been the reframing of welfare from one of entitlement to one of conditionality (Dwyer, 2004), putting at the centre the balance between individual rights and obligations. Increasingly, welfare is based on the 'something for something' society (Blair, 1998), where the expected duties of the individual are more clearly prioritised. Welfare reform then is more than an economic imperative: it literally becomes a 'remoralising' exercise, redefined as a system that encourages active participation of its citizens over passively dispensing compensation to those in need (see Kemshall, 2002: 111–112).

The theme of rights and responsibilities is then witnessed through a number of policy initiatives, and when seen in terms of a broader social framework can be applied to almost all aspects of youth policy. Rights in this case are often framed as a right to participate, with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child often underpinning the rationale for encouraging the 'duty to consult'. Recent youth policy in the United Kingdom has sought to engage young people in the process of formulation, for instance through *Youth Matters* consulting the views of nearly 20,000 young people, and through the commitment in *Positive for Youth* to give a stronger voice to young people.

Social responsibility is a more complex policy development. Obligations on young people are either quite specific (children will not truant, or they/their parents will face financial penalties) or rather more ambiguous (increasing 'respect', for instance). In whatever form they take, the desired moral and social behaviour of young people is increasingly determined by policy and instructed through education and welfare services (Armstrong, 2009).

Implications for practice

The start of this chapter indicated that work with young people in the UK now offers a more diverse employment market driven by new and expanding policy intentions. This market includes housing authorities, the police, youth offending teams, health services, education, and welfare and guidance services. Much of the work is prescriptive and targeted, but creativity and diversity still flourish: practitioners do indeed seek to empower young people and develop meaningful relationships built upon increased trust (Yates, 2009).

The guiding principles of youth work have in recent tradition been bound to those of informal education: an emphasis on voluntary association, starting from where the learner is at and encouraging them to reflect on their own experiences (Jeffs and Smith, 2005) in order to engage in a process of moral philosophy (Young, 2006).

However, these principles are under challenge: how, for instance, to ensure voluntary association in a court-ordered programme for young offenders? Or does a youth worker cease to be a youth worker when joining such a system? What is clear from the changing knowledge and policy landscape is that those with a training in youth work can contribute much to these newer contexts, perhaps offering creativity in working within these new frameworks and changed agendas. They can play a significant role that re-examines the problems that young people present, and attempt to negotiate more holistic problem definitions and solutions. It is therefore important to see the picture as far from gloomy.

Practitioners are increasingly promoting ways of engaging young people in influencing and shaping their social worlds. The increased attention to active citizenship and social capital offers a gateway to an alternative focus on young people as agents who can shape their social contexts with the support of trusted adults. This relies, however, on learning the lessons from research and practice where young people's views actively shape adult understanding of their worlds. It also requires practitioners to re-evaluate and restate their own values and ethical positions so that these can act as lamplights in a complex, challenging and constantly changing set of environments.

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