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# What future for youth work?

Some years ago I wrote a book called *Creators not Consumers* (1980, 1982). It was basically a call for youth workers to explore and embrace their identity as educators. I was also trying to encourage workers to think about the ways in which private troubles are often wrapped up with public issues; and to commit themselves to working with young people to organizing things themselves. It seemed at the time that too much youth work treated young people as customers or consumers of a service. A lot of workers were focused on provision of activities and an attractive social environment. They didn't seem to understand see themselves as teachers or educators - helping people realize the learning in everyday life. Nor did they work to involve young people in their clubs and groups. Unfortunately, in the twenty five or so intervening years things have gone from bad to worse. Developments in policy and practice have effectively strengthened the focus on young people as consumers. Unfortunately, in many situations they are increasingly being treated like commodities - objects to be monitored and acted upon.

Here I want to chart a little of what has gone wrong - and suggest some ways forward.

## 1. The emerging shape of work with young people

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I want to start by focusing on England - not because what is happening there is more interesting than developments in Wales or Scotland - but because the contrasts are starker, and failures more fundamental. The key reference points here are *Youth Matters* and *Aiming high for young people*. The first, significant thing to note here is that the focus is no longer on youth work nor youth services - but rather on services or activities for young people.

In the current sets of realignments three key sectors are significant:

- Children's services/trusts.
- Schools
- Civil society (especially churches and faith groups)

We are witnessing the disappearance of youth services and the much heralded (and dismally failing) Connexions Service – and a fundamental shift in the character of what was state-sponsored youth work. In part this is due to the location of the work within the social work framework provided by *Every Child Matters*. However, it is also the result of a longer-run movement into more individualized, outcome-focused, programmatic, and conservative understandings of the work. Much of the work promised in *Aiming High* will take place in schools.

In Scotland, where youth work has, since the early 1970s, been viewed in policy terms as within community education and then community development learning strategies, the focus and organization of the work has been a little different. However, one of the striking features of the new Scottish strategy for 'improving young people's chances through youth work' – *Moving Forward* – is the extent to which it embraces many of the concerns, interests and language of recent English documents. Significantly, it doesn't actually discuss what youth work is, and while there are various references to community learning, it tends to frame the discussion in terms of 'specialised targeted provision designed to meet the needs of young people who are particularly vulnerable or who have specific needs' (Scottish Executive 2007: 4).

Only the Welsh policymakers – in their National Youth Service Strategy for Wales, had a reasonably firm grasp of youth work and the potential contribution it could make. However, it was rather undermined by a failure (like the other documents) to properly address the significance of civil society and community development (which has been part of a long tradition within Welsh youth work policy). It did not bring forward significant additional funding, and had a strong emphasis upon on a raft of targets to be met.

## 2. The nature of youth work

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What we now know as youth work emerged in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. By the end of that century such 'work among youth' had established its typical forms: the club, the uniformed troupe, the fellowship, and outreach to those not initially attracted to such groups. By the end of the

Second World War many of the key practices and ideas were in place – and were reflected in a growing literature. Most significant amongst these was Josephine Macalister Brew who both wrote the first account of ‘modern’ youth work (1943) and the first full-length treatment of informal education (1947). According to Doyle and Smith (forthcoming), it had also gained its classic characteristics:

- Attention to the needs, experiences and contribution of young people. Crucially it provided a place of *sanctuary*; a second home (McLaughlin *et al* 1994; Hirsch 2005).
- Workers who were able, in the later words of the McNair Report (1944), to be 'a *guide, philosopher and friend to young people*'. Much was dependent on their character and integrity (see Smith and Smith forthcoming).
- A focus on relationship and upon encouraging all to join together in friendship to organize and take part in groups and activities. This was often described as fostering fellowship and associational life. In current language there was an interest in fostering *social capital and civic society* (see, for example, Putnam 1999; Edwards 2005).
- A concern to create moments for reflection and learning. When combined with the above it could be described as a process of friends educating each other.
- Working on the basis on choice. Young people could accept or reject the invitation to take part. *The voluntary principle*.

This was an orientation that was taken up by key theorists during the 1960s – in particular Bernard Davies and Alan Gibson (1967), Fred Milson (1963, 1966, 1970), and George Goetschius and Joan Tash (1967). However, all these writers had a deep interest in promoting and sustaining professionalization within the field – and to the extension of state services. For a decade or more the work flourished – and gained a new language, that of social education. But, as we will see, state intervention brought in its train bureaucratization and a move toward central control.

The purpose of the work was well summed up by the motto of the Oxford and Bermondsey Club in the early 1900s – *Fratres* (fraternity). It was also infused with Christian concern as the aim of the Time and Talents Guild (from the same period) makes clear: ‘To seek through fellowship, prayer and service to bring the Spirit of Christ into every part of life’. In the 1960s and early 1970s the words ‘community’ and ‘relationship’ were often used. The aim was to work with young people in community so that they might better relate to themselves,

others and the world. Those within religious settings might well add in relationship to God. The recent interest in the cultivation of social capital and in the development and flourishing of the whole person can be seen as standing in a direct line with these concerns.

Youth work is fundamentally about community; about working as John Dewey put it, so that all may share in the common life. It is an activity of communities – and therein lays the problem, as we will see, for much state-sponsored work.

### 3. The state of state-sponsored work

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Youth work is becoming peripheral to what we used to know as youth services; it is sometimes found in schools; the dwindling numbers of open centres; and around the edges of formal activity. As a central set of processes it is now largely the province of smaller voluntary organizations, church-based groups and to some extent in the uniformed organizations.

At one level this shouldn't be surprising. Youth work was born of civil society; it was embraced in a limited way by the state; it is now returning largely to a concern of civil society.

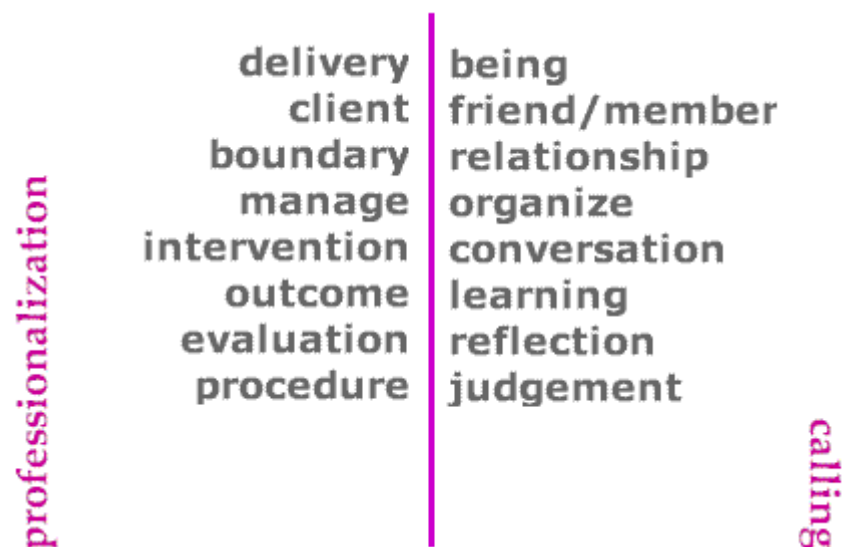
In short, state-sponsored youth work has lost its way.

- *Secularization and professionalization* has cut links with many of the ideals and practices of the social and religious movements that gave birth to youth work.
- *State-sponsored services failed to respond to the changing experiences* of young people and to shifts in society as a whole.
- *State-sponsored youth services became cautious, bureaucratized and managerial.* Much of the innovatory work of the 1980s and 1990s was based in the voluntary sector.
- *To sustain funding services and agencies made a case for their activities around the needs of 'problematic' young people.* 'Issue-based' work became more the norm for such services.
- *State-sponsored youth agencies are now at the forefront of a fundamental attack on the rights of young people – especially the right to privacy.*

The result has been a movement into a more individualized, programmatic and accredited form of working. In many respects much of the work undertaken by state-sponsored

youth services is better described as a conservative version of the north American tradition of youth development rather than youth work. In this there has been a break with the past. A new outcome-focused and curriculum-led culture has come to dominate. In addition, the use of information and communication technologies is reconfiguring the work of those working with young people. Local workers have a decreased degree of discretion and have to participate in a far greater number of routinized activities. There is also the matter of the way in which servicing the needs of databases is eroding the amount of time that workers are spending with young people.

Finally, there has been a fundamental shift – from a discourse of calling to one of bureaucratic professionalism.



These represent very different ways of being with young people.

#### 4. So what has this got to do with youth work?

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## 5. The renaissance in religious-based and local youth work

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Since its inception youth work has overwhelmingly been undertaken by volunteers and workers in local groups. These groups, in turn, are part of national and international

movements. Scouting and guiding provide a very visible and constant example of this. In recent years, however, three important growth areas have emerged and which stand in line with the core concerns of youth work.

First, within many Christian churches and religious groups there has been a deepening and accelerating interest in work with young people. By 1998, the English Church Attendance Survey found that some 21 per cent of churches had a full-time salaried youth worker. This figure may have included some curates who had youth work as their prime responsibility - but it is nonetheless very significant. The most recent figures suggest that there are around 5,500 full-time youth workers employed by churches and Christian agencies, more than the statutory youth service (Centre for Youth Ministry 2006). There are also said to be around 100,000 volunteers. Churches have become the largest employer of youth workers in the country. This development has been accompanied by a similar growth in the literature of the area; some interesting explorations of theology; and the expansion of specifically Christian youth work training. Within Protestant churches this development is to a significant extent associated with the rise of evangelicalism since the 1960s. One of the most important aspects of this development is that the money to employ workers and fund the work is generated almost wholly from within the Church. As a result, this work is not susceptible to the same sort of lever-pulling as those receiving state funding.

Second, there has been a significant growth of interest in, and practice around, Muslim youth work. For some years there has been work going on - for example around mosques and various youth associations - sometimes associated with different political groupings (e.g. the Bangladeshi Youth Association). However, in recent years, with much larger numbers of Muslims becoming youth workers, and with a recognition that significant areas of provision didn't address the needs of different groupings of young Muslims, there has been both a developing literature (e.g. the special edition of *Youth and Policy*) and some important innovations in practice.

Third, and in part as a result of initiatives such as New Deal for Communities and, more recently, the establishment of an £80 million fund in 2007 to provide small grants to community groups. The encouragement of tenant management also appears to have generated some growth in interest in youth work by local community and tenants groups.

## 6. Some challenges for us

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Here I just want to identify five challenges for us. To:

Re-embrace the language of calling (*questioning professionalization*). One of the major lessons to be learnt from the British experience is the extent to which professionalization has both created unhelpful social distance between workers and young people, and taken the focus away from relationship and engagement. Youth work only really makes sense as an activity of civil society, and in the context of significant social and religious movements.

Retain integrity and discretion - doing what is right, rather than what is correct (*resisting bureaucratization and managerialism*). Professionalism and its slide into managerialism and bureaucratization – when combined with a strong centralizing imperative and the need to ‘protect children’ through information sharing – has led to a significant diminution in the discretion of front-line workers. With codes of conduct, procedures, work-plans and all the paraphernalia of the large centralized organization, state-sponsored youth work has lost its refreshness and ability to respond to what is right and good. Instead, there is an emphasis upon the ‘correct’ and as a result a good deal has been lost.

Offer a place of sanctuary - away from state, institutional, family and peer pressure (*arguing for privacy and space, and against surveillance and 'joined-up' services*). One of the most significant and frightening developments in the last few years has been the increase in surveillance of young people, and the storing of data on information systems that are open to various ‘professionals’. It adds up to a fundamental breach of the rights of the child – and undermines much of the rationale for youthwork.

Offer community and relationship (*resisting individualization - a focus on private troubles rather than public issues*). We have to look to the classic concern with association in youth work and to seeing people as members of a whole rather than as presenting some individual trouble.

Engage with civil society (*embracing 'Jazz' - unscripted, voluntary initiatives that are decentralized and improvisational*). Here there is much to be learnt from the green movement – and the need to scale down large centralized initiatives and augment them with more informal, people-centred activity.

That is, I think, something of the challenge that we face. Those working within the state sector or who are substantially

funded by the state will find it difficult to respond to these challenges. However, for the large number of youth work groups for whom state-sponsorship is marginal or non-existent there is a great opportunity. Young people will increasingly reject provision that is linked into monitoring and surveillance systems, which looks to accreditation, and is 'delivered' to them by agencies and workers that come and go. Work that offers sanctuary and is local and based in relationship is very attractive in the face of the various pressures placed upon young people to conform and perform.

**Mark K. Smith**  
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This paper draws upon material from a forthcoming book by Tony Jeffs and Mark K. Smith on youth work to be published by Palgrave in 2008.

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