Youth Work Education: Is the voluntary principle no longer reliable in defining youth work?

Introduction

At a time when traditional orthodoxies are open to challenge it is useful to critically reflect on changing youth work practice contexts. Asserting the voluntary principle and free choice in open access youth work helps us to distinguish educational youth work methodologies from types of work with young people across a range of disciplinary areas where young people are required to attend. Yet, the context, in which the voluntary principle became established in the UK, has changed. New roles are emerging for youth workers in contexts where the voluntary principle may be compromised (Coburn and Gormally, 2015a; Coburn, 2011; Ord 2016, 2009).

If we are to maximise the reach of educational youth work, it will be important for practitioners to sustain core CLD values within new and emerging domains of practice. It is also important to challenge the hegemonic norm of education as schooling, which is vital to the development of parity across education professions. Otherwise, as Crowther (2017, p. 6) asserts, 'In a system stacked towards schools and teachers it is clear that the teaching profession will have the loudest voice'. This discussion is particularly relevant at a time when the marketization of education (Ball, 2003; 2013) has brought external private consultants and commercially run organisations into schools to fulfil roles that might otherwise be undertaken by professionally qualified youth work educators. This not only brings potentially inflated costs in supporting or enhancing aspects of core curricula, it also negates the impact and nuanced understandings of a professionally qualified educational workforce that includes youth work educators. It is in this sense that we seek a more inclusive understanding of education, which is not limited to schooling.

Youth Work and the established 'Voluntary Principle'

The voluntary principle is something that has been viewed as an underpinning tenet of youth work (Davies, 2015, 2005; Jeffs and Smith, 2002; Taylor, 2009) that shapes every aspect of how we engage in learning relationships with young people. This principle has also been called into question and challenged as a necessary requirement in identifying what is, or is not, youth work (Coburn and Gormally, 2015a; Coburn, 2011; Ord 2016, 2009).

The defining principles as set out by Davies (2005; 2015) necessitates that work with young people can only be called youth work if it can answer positively to nine questions focussing on setting, remit, purpose and practice. One such question set by Davies (2015, p.6) is-

> Is the practice taking place in settings which are 'open access' and to which young people have chosen to come, that is, is their participation voluntary?

The idea of a voluntary principle (Davies, 2005) or voluntary participation (Davies, 2015) suggests that youth work pedagogy is located in a space where relations are voluntarily enacted upon by all involved and that the setting is open access, promoting freedom of entering and exiting the context without recourse or incrimination. In revisiting his original manifesto for youth work, Davies (2015) reasserted the importance of setting, not just in terms of a physical building but in any setting that has been pre-chosen by young people.

Davies (2015) also notes that in the current context many people are employed as youth workers in settings that are not open access. Acknowledging the positive impact this could make, Davies does not specifically criticise this work but states:

> ...none of this can be a substitute for the open access provision to which they came voluntarily (or not), over whose style and content they had some genuine leverage and whose distinctive benefits were often only achievable because of the more equal power relationships between adult and young person (Davies, 2015, p.8).

We agree with Davies' suggestion that current work with unemployed young people as bespoke 'employability' work is no substitute for open access youth work. This is especially cogent where sanctions may be applied for non-attendance as the young people in such situations have very little power, other than the power to opt out of the process and to accept sanctions for non-attendance. Indeed, we acknowledge that this kind of work could be framed as 'working with young people' and 'delivered' in keeping with a formulaic and compliant neo-liberal discourse. Our purpose here is to argue that this is not in the best interests of the young people who are coerced to engage in such processes, particularly when high levels of youth unemployment mean that young people's chances of finding employment at the end of a 12 week intervention are weak and rarely guaranteed.

Yet, our position is that when youth workers are employed in such settings, they can still be doing youth work by framing practice as an educational methodology which offers an alternative perspective that is based on values of equality and social justice (Coburn and Gormally, 2017; 2015b). This is distinct from a purpose in perpetuating the neo-liberal project (Cooper, 2012) via compliance and commodification of people and practices. As Coussée (2008) notes youth work practitioners could, utilising social pedagogy, transform social problems into educational issues. Indeed, we would argue that more youth workers could be routinely employed in such contexts because they are highly skilled and qualified in negotiating relationships that underpin the development of powerful learning environments, and thus, bring additionality to contemporary employability processes.

Where the initial threat of sanctions is a catalyst for attendance, the application of youth work values and methodologies, can be helpful in supporting young people to campaign against such punitive measures, from within, and so respond positively to all of the questions posed by Davies in 'searching out youth work's distinctive identity' (2015, p.100). It is also worth noting that any youth work offer, by the state or another adult-led organisation, that claims to be open access provision, does not always guarantee that those directly involved will uphold the values and principles of a distinctive educational youth worker identity, as situations and practices vary. Thus, our assertion is that even in contexts where a young person does not attend voluntarily, and is not free to walk away from the encounter, authentic educational youth work may still be possible, so long as the work is developed within the core values for, and purposes of, professional democratic practice.

Taking open access, aligned to voluntary participation, as the paramount position effectively mitigates youth work from taking place in any setting where young people did not voluntarily choose to attend – including compulsory schooling, prisons or hospitals. Thus, the voluntary principle can reduce possibilities for youth work in inter-professional or collaborative contexts. In this sense, it may be helpful to consider an alternative position as a means of strengthening policy and practice development.

This alternative perspective begins by asking practitioners and young people to consider the problem of what is happening when youth workers are working in settings that are not deemed to be in keeping with the voluntary principle:

1. What is it that they are doing differently?

2.   Do their professional identities, values or principles shift (or are they left behind), at the school or prison gates?

3.   What is it that they are doing, if it is not youth work?

We are inclined to also question how frequently youth work, within tightly defined open access parameters, is ever taking place. It would also be amiss to assume that all practice within open access settings, where young people voluntarily engage, is positive, effective youth work. As Cooper (2012) notes, we need to be careful not to simply socialise young people into existing dominant power structures without any critical reflection on the potential benefits and negative impacts of these structures on young people.

Our position is that youth work takes place in a wide variety of both open and closed access settings, where youth work practitioners are effectively subverting persistent hegemonies by creating effective spaces for what Jeffs and Smith (2005) have identified as conversational learning as a core methodology in youth work practice. This places the emphasis back on the type of youth work and its distinguishing nature and purpose, as distinct from the setting or space in which it is conducted. This brings a focus on the negotiated nature of the relationships between young people and youth workers to suggest that if, 'the negotiated aspects of relationship building are clearly visible, then the voluntary principle need not hold the 'deal-breaker' status it currently occupies'(Coburn and Gormally, 2015a, p.205). It raises questions about how youth workers might negotiate voluntary relationships within complex or closed contexts and again asserts the importance of parity across education professions.

Youth Work in Schools, Youth Work as Education

Positioning youth work as one domain of educational practice, our first message is to acknowledge and address an imbalance in dominant educational discourse that sees education as schooling. While school education and teacher educators have a key role in facilitating the education of young people, this is only one part of the education continuum. The notion that youth work is a poor relation to broader educational practices needs to be more deeply examined at pedagogical and policy levels. It is interesting to note that the current educational governance review in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2017) includes youth work in its recognition of CLD workers as 'professionals who play a key role in educating our children' (p.37) and in requiring that, 'every school has a

teacher or …[other]… professional who has responsibility for promoting parental, family and community engagement' (p. 43). Further, de St Croix (2017) calls for a review of the National Citizen's Service in England, suggesting that,' after a period of transition, the resources currently allocated to NCS should be devolved…[via participatory budgeting, to]…young people, youth workers and community members'.

These developments give hope for an enlightened future in asserting youth work as education (Harland and McCready, 2012), whereby it should be possible for young people to have choices about where youth work happens, across a range of settings that may or may not be open-access youth centres or in places where young people chose to spend their leisure time. In a formal school setting this means that young people can choose whether to meaningfully engage or not. Evidence from research that examined young people's views of multi-agency working in a school setting supports changing perspectives on the benefits of youth worker engagement:

> School-based mentors with a youth work background were singled out by young people as offering useful support and intervention. In many schools they play a central role in supporting vulnerable young people through one-to-one discussion in a secure and appropriate environment. The evidence showed that mentors were effective at helping young people to support and articulate their needs and to develop appropriate coping strategies. Young people reported high levels of trust and confidentiality in their relationships with mentors
>
> Harris and Allen (2011, p.409)

This research was about multi-agency work in schools and in particular the perceptions of young people in regard to their experiences of mentors from a youth work background. Yet, we believe that it also offers useful insights on the possibilities for youth work as education, in schools. Rather than limiting practices to formalised mentoring roles, the role of youth worker as social educator, life skills coach and emancipatory practitioner remains untried on a large scale, within school environments. Yet, the impact of youth work in transforming lives is already evident.

In researching the experiences and perceptions of young people who may be labelled as excluded or marginal due to being categorised as Not in Employment, Education or Training (NEET) (Yates and Payne, 2006), Finlay et al (2010) reported on the experiences of one young man who, following multiple periods of suspension from school, 'was later awarded an Outstanding Young Scot award

for his work mentoring younger teenagers. In the context of school he was, in his own words, ''a little shit', yet in another context an outstanding example of a young person. The authority structure of schooling did not suit him' (p.863).

This study exemplified how, as educational methodology, youth work had contributed to this young man's transformation. Grounded in sustained empowering relationships, this kind of youth work helped him to take his life in a more positive direction than when he attended school – from which he had been in excluded 26 times, prior to engaging in informal youth work education at Young Scot. It was suggested that:

> Youth workers and advisors in these sectors seemed to be able to develop the kind of close, supportive relationships with young people that are difficult to develop in secondary schools because of the structures and numbers involved in the latter.

> Finlay et al (2010, p. 866)

Of course this is not a criticism levied at individual school teachers, rather it challenges a system where '…management and performativity leave no space of an autonomous or collective ethical self' (Ball, 2013, p. 226) and where 'Students' performances in public examinations are one of the outputs that gauge teachers' performativity…' (Nicholl and McLellan, 2008, p. 587). This inevitably has an impact on the kind of relationships created at a time when young people yearn for trusting, respectful and high quality inter-personal relationships with teachers and other adults involved in their education (Gorard and Huat See, 2011; Poulou, 2014; Wubbels, 2005).

The education system, has been argued as maintaining stability despite the potential risk this poses to some young people, where:

> The foundational need is…to make the voice of young people more influential, and in response to shift policy more radically, rather than continuing to create policies which, though putatively designed to address the 'needs' of this group, function to pathologise them and provide a smokescreen for the maintenance of educational homeostasis

> Lumby (2012, p.276)

Moreover, for those who are deemed to be on the margins of school, compulsory education can be disempowering to their future educational pathways (Aaltonen, 2012). This labelling of young people as being in deficit or in 'need' places blame on the individual rather than the structure (Coburn and Gormally, 2017). As a counterbalance to such pathologising discourses, youth work methodology offers practice that is developed through purposeful dialogue with young people. Rather than being driven by a constraining subject specific curriculum, driven by adult subject experts, the youth work curriculum is driven by young people as 'experts' in their own lived experience. In striving for a more socially just world we are puzzled as to why in some circumstances this might not be called youth work?

In light of changing contexts for youth work, we believe that youth work has reached a professional 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2000) and that it is time reconsider the voluntary principle. Youth workers in schools, offer an integrated educative process that is widely accessible to all but is acutely important to those who are at greatest risk of becoming excluded from their peers, communities and society. Educational youth work has a key role to play in strengthening the holistic well-being of all young people as active in contributing to, at individual and community level, the making of a good life.

Conclusion

As practitioners we need to reassert our practice within a persistently changing environment. In doing so we raise questions about what type of professional is required in a range of contexts where non- traditional education is necessary. In taking multiple perspectives, educational providers have the potential to work inter-collaboratively. This creates new youth work opportunities to strengthen capacity for sustained engagement and dialogue with young people. Working across disciplines and contexts does not require us to give up core values and principles but allows us to reflect on how these are negotiated in our educational practices with young people.

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