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*“La Filosofía Comunitaria” : ¿un enfoque que transforma la intervención social ante los jóvenes?*

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## Context

- 1 It would seem beyond dispute that social work (in the widest sense of its definition<sup>1</sup>), and the social policy that underpins it, aims to improve people's lives - and that this is a worthy aim. While social professionals are often deeply motivated by this aim, many are concerned that their work merely scratches at the surface of more deep-seated problems in society. They fear being able to do little more than help people cope, rather than help change the circumstances that, many believe, are at the root of these problems. This aspiration for 'transformational practices' has, however, often been downplayed, perhaps even ridiculed:

It is clear that those who feel that they are effecting fundamental changes in society through their work are labouring under a misapprehension. Observation shows that there is often a difference between the analysis and the *action*; the analysis is often conflict-based, the action (the youth work) is functionalist and is a pragmatic response.<sup>2</sup>

- 2 This paper examines the potential of a particular methodology specifically designed as a transformative practice. It questions whether this aim is realisable, by asking: "Does it improve young people's lives ... over and above helping them to 'cope'?"
- 3 The methodology employs philosophy as a youth and community work intervention. It is referred to as "*Community Philosophy*"<sup>3</sup>. At the outset, we need to recognise the rarity of

philosophy's use as a social work intervention. Arguably, this is due to the stereotype of it being 'detached from reality', or 'not serving any practical purpose'. That Epicurus cautioned against this so long ago only seems to have added to its disregard: "Any philosopher's argument which does not therapeutically treat human suffering is worthless there is no profit in philosophy when it doesn't expel the sufferings of the mind"<sup>4</sup>. Epicurus, of course, did believe philosophy had this therapeutic potential. Despite his optimism, he has nothing to say about its transformative power. The question remains: is philosophy as a tool for transformation a "pipe-dream"<sup>5</sup>?

- 4 Contextually, we should also remind ourselves that social work interventions in general are subject to intense and increasing scrutiny, particularly as the problems faced by many young people, and wider communities, so often seem intractable. Social mobility, for example, is, for many, rarely achieved. In the UK this is of particular concern, as: "The chances British children set out with in life are indeed more dependent on family background than those of youngsters elsewhere in Europe."<sup>6</sup> But then, if we were to adopt a philosophical disposition, we might begin to consider these problems in a different light. Baggini's conceptualisation of philosophy sets the scene:

The most important respect in which philosophy differs from – and is in some sense superior to – self-help is that it encourages us to think about the value of ends and not just the means to achieve them. In theory, self-help could do this too, but in general, the genre is focussed on helping you to get what you want, not questioning whether you are right to want it. ... [Philosophy] is a rich resource among many, one that contributes to our understanding of the good life rather than prescribing what it should be.<sup>7</sup>

- 5 In this sense, we might question the entire perspective on what it is to 'improve people's lives' and whether social mobility, as an example of an assumed good, is itself a worthy end; (along with other ends judged as valuable in social policy). This is not an attempt to 'cloud the water', rather to argue that this paper demands to be written from a philosophical stance. This becomes clearer if we recognise that, in *Community Philosophy*, it is the deliberate act of asking [young] people what *they* think would improve their lives, and trusting their responses, that is significant.
- 6 This process of engaging young people has, of course, been done before; indeed 'consultation' is now commonplace and, some would say, *de rigueur*. Rather, CP's uniqueness is in *how* these questions are asked and in the practical and critical application of a discipline that takes nothing for granted and is prepared to examine the issues brought forward *by participants* (rather than 'teachers') and seen from *their* perspectives.
- 7 Finally, in political terms, there is, perhaps inevitably, a greater interest in *upward* mobility than on its logical, inescapable, corollary – social movement in the opposite direction<sup>8</sup>. Once we acknowledge this, we might then see that this could be 'part of the problem'.
- 8 Let us now briefly consider the theoretical underpinnings of Community Philosophy and what it looks like in practice.

## What is Community Philosophy?

### Theoretical underpinnings

- 9 Community Philosophy is an adapted version of an educational approach called 'Philosophy for Children', or P4C<sup>9</sup>. P4C originated in the USA more than twenty years ago and has since been used in schools around the world. It was developed by Professor Matthew Lipman and associates at the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children, Montclair State College, New Jersey.
- 10 Lipman emphasised the importance of questioning, or 'enquiry', in the development of reasoning. He proposed that we learn to think in much the same way as we learn to speak, that is, by internalising the patterns of thought and speech that we hear around us. Thinking for ourselves is, in effect then, borrowing the language of others to talk to ourselves<sup>10</sup>.
- 11 Lipman developed a model of learning that he named 'Community of Enquiry' (CoE). In this, teacher and learners collaborate with each other in order to grow in understanding of the material, ethical and personal worlds around them. Enquiry is interpreted as going beyond information, to seek understanding. The key practice (that results in significant changes of thought and acting in the world) is that of reflection.
- 12 This way of working has made Community of Enquiry attractive to a variety of social professionals who have sought to transfer this model from the classroom to community settings. As such, it is increasingly popular among youth workers. A particular interest has been in the use of *Community Philosophy* as an intervention capable of stimulating critical reflection on community issues and problems. An aim is to use the understanding that emerges – the learning – to inform action and seek resolution of these problems; hence the methodology's 'practical' orientation and its aspiration to act as a 'transformational practice'.

### What does CP look like in practice?

- 13 Invariably, CP facilitators are (as we might imagine of all 'social' workers) good conversationalists. But their aim is to deepen and personalise these conversations by encouraging participants to move beyond generalisations about 'we' or 'they' to a position where the young people take greater responsibility for what they say. Typically, a facilitator might ask: "What do you think?" or "What is your experience?" or "What are your reasons?"
- 14 The social dimensions of CP are also very important: they emphasise collaboration. This makes it, implicitly then, a moral, ethical and democratic process. By being attentive and responsive, and constantly adapting their interventions, facilitators can encourage participants to value and respond to the challenges of others. It is this dimension that is most likely to represent a different experience for young people. Rather than questions coming from a 'teacher', in a Community of Enquiry they are just as likely to come from, and be directed toward, fellow participants. Indeed, the facilitator will positively encourage this ... and responses to these questions. To do this, they must be acutely aware of issues of power, authority and control<sup>11</sup> and resist dominating discussions. In so doing, it is possible to support a genuine *Community of Enquiry*. This too, is an experience so

rarely had by young people, many of whom report that expressing an opinion can often, particularly in institutional settings such as school (and equally sometimes in mainstream youth work<sup>12</sup>), be frowned upon.

- 15 It becomes clear then that what sets Community Philosophy apart from other youth work practices is the fact that it takes place within a framework of participatory ethics. Adherence to these protects its methodology from being used in instrumental and tokenistic ways. Significantly, Community Philosophy's emphasis on dialogue is based on the strongest interpretation of this concept: that dialogue is a process entered into *in the belief that we learn through that engagement*. The fact that this must apply equally to all those who are involved means that Community Philosophy makes great demands of the youth worker / educator. They must believe in and be committed to those philosophies that elevate the status of mutual learning within a wider critical pedagogy; the works of Buber, Habermas, along with Freire and his more recent devotees (e.g. Apple, Giroux and McLaren, who are often referred to as the 'new Freirians') are most relevant. The thesis here is that this mutuality is essential for the work to be democratic, autonomy-enhancing and centred on consciousness-raising. These ethics cannot be 'turned on / turned off'; it is a way of 'talking with and working with', rather than 'talking to and doing to', intrinsic to all, not just some, interventions. It is the facilitator's deliberate and whole-hearted commitment to mutual learning that makes 'genuine' dialogue possible; they must be vigilant to avoid slipping into traditional adult and elitist power roles.
- 16 Also, when compared with youth work interventions that draw upon theories of informal education<sup>13</sup>, Community of Enquiry-based methodology may be regarded as oddly systematic. There is an irony here; the methodology's innate flexibility and responsiveness (which is its strength) can, because of this systematisation, be exported from one setting to another, provided the facilitator respects the basic steps of the process. In practical terms, this means a group will, invariably, participate on a voluntary basis and be talked through what is, in fact, an 'organised activity'. Thereafter, a particular stimulus will be chosen, either by the facilitator or the participants (although the facilitator may often have greater access to resources that are suitably ambiguous i.e. do not dictate a particular interpretation). This stimulus acts as a starting point for discussion. The stimulus might be an image such as a picture from a storybook, a photograph, an article from a newspaper or magazine, or a clip from television or video. Art, drama and music might just as easily be used. The stimulus is used to generate a question, often by inviting pairs of young people to formulate questions of interest to them. Thereafter, the wider group will review these questions. They either vote to discuss a question or subject those proposed to further scrutiny in order to identify one that resonates with all. This last process is best, as it invariably produces a question that everyone is interested in. This question is then made the focus of exploration by the whole group; the facilitator will encourage its *philosophical* interrogation. Typically, reasons are demanded of claims made. Where they are found wanting, this is celebrated as learning and encouragement is offered to 'move it on' in pursuit of further insights. And so on. Mutual encouragement and support, characterised by a commitment to listening and a willingness to change one's mind are the hallmarks.
- 17 That participants develop these 'skills' over time, and through experience, is testament also to Deweyian influences. Certainly, in the work examined here, those involved have shown that they become increasingly comfortable with both giving and receiving criticism and responsive to the provocations of facilitators to clarify, expand and connect

ideas; formulate generalisations; identify distinctions and explore implications. Equally, they become more skilled and familiar with evaluating, reviewing, summarising and concluding<sup>14</sup>. In Community Philosophy, this concluding dimension includes speculation on how learning might be applied to others areas of life, and actions that might be taken to move this learning on – typically agreeing to pursue further learning or becoming involved in community action. Furthermore, evidence exists that this learning *is* routinely transferred to other areas of life. Young people have reported ‘thinking better’ about the challenges they face at home, in school, in their friendships and in how they engage with the wider community.

- 18 In *Community Philosophy* a pre-determined question may also be used (i.e. without this initial generative process). This way of working is popular among social professionals who, for example, wish to consult on, and understand, for example, community attitudes to specific problems and work with groups in order to achieve their resolution. In the case study material that follows, topics included anti-social behaviour, services and facilities for young people, and local regeneration. In almost all cases, the enquiries generated a desire on the part of young people to be involved in further practical activities, be they further enquiries, specific pieces of research or forms of community action. The involvement of other groups (such as older people taking part in inter-generational dialogue) or representatives of service intent in widening participation in decision-making is commonplace, thereby adding further participative dimensions and bolstering the potential of Community Philosophy to act as a force for change.

## The CP interventions: Description and Outcomes.

- 19 The findings that follow are drawn from the study of a project in the north of England in 2006 - 2009.

### New Earswick Community Philosophy Project: *The Thinking Village*

- 20 The project was commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF)<sup>15</sup> as a demonstration / experimental project to test this innovative methodology in a neighbourhood of both privately owned and local authority owned houses where most properties are managed by a housing trust. By many indices, the area is only moderately deprived. This said, the project grew out of a series of interventions aimed at dealing with problems of anti-social behaviour but were generally held by the local community to have been unsuccessful. These included the use of CCTV (closed circuit television), a contracted policing experiment<sup>16</sup> and demands for a Dispersal Order<sup>17</sup>. Initial research identified not only very real problems but also high levels of anxiety among adults in the community about young people. This translated into a general antipathy and intolerance of young people. As such, JRF recognised that something innovative was needed. Proposals were sought from a range of organisations and consultants. A committee of local people subsequently chose a schema designed to engage with the complexity of the relationship between perception and reality, and intervene both with those young people implicated

in this behaviour, many of whom were considered 'at risk', and those adults displaying intolerance toward them.

21 The project's aims were to:

- Promote wider community conversations that can be enjoyed for their own sake (or valued in other ways) especially between the generations and about controversial issues; provide a medium for learning through philosophical enquiry; and act as a stimulus for action and problem-solving.
- Develop relationships within the community and across professional groups to enable different groups to work with each other, including around issues of potential conflict. These relationships should, wherever possible, lead to self-sustaining dialogue (dialogue that persists after and outside of the project's activities).

22 Three project workers were employed, with the title 'Community Philosopher'. They received training in Community of Enquiry through a recognised training agency, albeit one more used to training teachers in P4C. They were given further professional support and on-going opportunities for guided reflection to adapt their training for use in a community context.

23 The project began at the time of the implementation of a Dispersal Order (in which the police had the power to insist that people present in a specified area, between specified hours, should 'disperse' or face arrest). This proved particularly controversial. During outreach, project workers heard many complaints from young people about how they were being policed in relation to the Order. Through discussion with the workers, the young people expressed an interest in exploring these issues further. This informed their decision to seek a dialogue between themselves and local police officers. The young people were encouraged to prepare for this by experiencing working with the Community of Enquiry methodology in their own groups; they explored their experiences and perceptions of the police in a space that was their own and that they considered safe. These activities developed into young people facilitating workshops with several other groups of young people from across the city, in order to gather a range of views. This enabled them to identify a theme – the rights of young people in relation to policing. This theme became the stimulus for a Community of Enquiry in which police officers participated. These enquiries were facilitated by the project workers. The young people were able to represent the wider views of young people and ask questions relating to issues they had invested time in exploring. The young people valued highly this opportunity to engage in this dialogue. A number stated: "I will never look at the police in the same way again." Significantly, these experiences were also celebrated by the police officers:

The questions put to us by young people were challenging and informative. Challenging because they questioned our basic rights as police officers to do our job and informative because the questions themselves spoke of the thoughts young people have of the police. ... Colleagues said the project had helped them understand what the views and expectations of young people were when they interacted with the police. This has helped police officers to deal with the reaction and behaviour they sometimes encounter in a more empathetic way. ... Community Philosophy creates a level of understanding between members of the community about issues that far too often go undisguised - as the opportunity to do so does not otherwise exist.

Police Officer

- 24 This is intriguing, as it illustrates that Community Philosophy differs from many other approaches in that it has the capacity to effect change in groups beyond that initially worked with – and that these groups (in this case the police) recognise there are few opportunities to engage in these kind of dialogues.
- 25 In this case, the work led a series of further sessions that became known as the Police Advisory Group.
- 26 Buoyed by confidence, particularly from the fact that the police were behaving in a more conciliatory manner on the street, the young people went on to establish a long-term youth group, the *Philosophy4U* project, which other young people from the community have joined. This continues to meet and use Community of Enquiry methodology to explore other issues of concern to young people living in the area. Many of these enquiries have resulted in young people expressing the desire to take further action<sup>18</sup>. For example, they identified several opportunities to become involved in community decision-making systems and participate in other forms of inter-generational activities (they continue to take part in regular activities – of both a philosophical and social nature – with a group of elderly people living in sheltered accommodation). As is the case with the Police Advisory Group, both the young people and elderly adults reported changed attitudes and behaviour and general improvements in their sense of well-being. Typically, elderly people stated they were less fearful of going out on the street – whereas previously they had been scared to do so because of concerns they had about young people in the community. This too illustrates Community Philosophy’s ‘knock-on’ effects. It is worth restating: this capacity to catalyse wider behavioural change makes it unusual in terms of social interventions.

### The Thinking Village: Evaluation

- 27 While these findings are reported by participants and project workers, the project has been more systematically evaluated by external researchers. The evaluators used an adapted version of the *Most Significant Change* (MSC) technique<sup>19</sup>, which was seen to have an affinity with the project’s own methodology.
- 28 The evaluators reported: “CP is an interesting tool to open up broad and sometimes deep controversial spaces. Such discussions are sufficiently thorough to be capable of triggering subsequent behaviour change.” They endorsed stakeholders’ statements which said: “CP seems particularly useful in terms of the intolerance agenda, rather than the crime and disorder agenda – it is something more encompassing; rather than simply focussing on one set of issues around one sort of population. ... CP is a tool that can help explore these issues in a more meaningful way.” The evaluators also stated: “The sustainable element which we have observed is the way that some participants have taken philosophical practices into their everyday lives. In this way the project can have a lasting effect on individual behaviour and practice.” Interestingly, this appears to have been true also for the project workers, who report: “...it’s different because you can’t switch off, it changes you for life.”
- 29 The evaluators also identified the value of the workers’ commitment to developing an approach based on a strong value base. This included: “ensuring the process is democratic and responsive to participants and taking into account the context in which they are working.” Perhaps even more significant is the judgement that working with



Community Philosophy can be difficult for an organisation: "It is a challenging approach and likely to throw up issues for the organisation, including challenging its power to set agendas and to decide who is heard, who influences and who is challenged. This leads us to conclude that an organisation can start off by setting the topic of a dialogue as part of the invitation to engage, but the CP process is one of communicative action and requires those in the organisation to let go of some aspects of control, to be prepared to live with emergence, and to support project workers to do the same."

- 30 In relation to the Police Advisory Group and other relationships that had developed between young people and service providers, the evaluators noted other unanticipated outcomes: "For some [professionals] involved the experience [of participating in CP] was very challenging as they were unused to this type of exchange. In the longer term, this raises an issue of capacity building for the professional agencies and other organisations engaging in philosophical debate." The evaluators noted also the conclusion of the project's advisory group that the valuing of democratic process in engaging with young people and the wider community had to be mirrored *within* the organisation that was doing this work; and that management structures needed also to reflect this commitment.
- 31 Some commentary on this external evaluation is justified.
- 32 Reference to the workers' commitment to a strong value base, and their obvious passion and enthusiasm for their work is recognised as only partially responsible for the project's successes. The project's community orientation (seeing different groups as cogs in an often complex and holistic system) is essential to its being able to trigger behavioural change beyond the groups targeted. Likewise, that this change is regarded by the evaluators as 'sustainable' illustrates that the methodology itself is significant in achieving these outcomes.
- 33 This is not to say that merely adopting of Community Philosophy methodology as a form of social intervention is sufficient for these outcomes to occur. Indeed, as both the external evaluation and the internal review reveal, much appears to depend on the capacity of both the individual worker and the culture of the host organisation to move away from prescribing a series of 'targets' to be achieved. Rather they have to trust to the inherent uncertainty of this way of working. The underpinning philosophy of dialogue does, however, demand this.
- 34 In addition to these findings of the external evaluators, the project has undertaken comprehensive internal evaluation. The themes emerging from a series of collaborative stakeholder interviews, in which young people participated, are to be found in Appendix 1.

## The Thinking Village: Concluding Remarks

- 35 The study finds that *Community Philosophy*, in itself, is no universal remedy for social problems or a mechanism that can guarantee improved living conditions for young people. What is significant is that participants overwhelmingly report positive impacts on *their lives*. It appears then that supporting young people in thinking through the issues and problems that affect them has positive outcomes for their sense of well-being, albeit that this can be relatively intangible in an 'outcomes oriented world'. That this is in tune with, arguably, the greatest of philosophical 'problems' in history: the attempt to define the 'good life' is, it seems, significant. Might we conclude that there is a profound

distinction between seeking to improve young people's 'living conditions' and supporting them in living the 'good life'? And that the latter's orientation around *their* sense of self, where 'needs' are substantively determined by them, is in sharp contrast to the externally (perhaps adult) influenced notion of [good] 'living conditions' common to so many other interventions?

- 36 It may be beyond coincidence that the former (an orientation around 'living conditions') is consistent with a more easily quantifiable 'ends'-related model of intervention, whereas the latter (orientation around the 'good life') is doggedly antithetical to identification, generalisation and, implicitly then, prescription.
- 37 Notwithstanding these affective dimensions, the study also shows that, at times, this thinking has translated into specific and effective action that *has* led to more tangible improvements in young people lives, and indeed the wider participating community. The example of improved relationships between young people and the police, and between them and older members of the community is verifiable and, it seems reasonable to say, a good outcome. That this coheres with the Community Cohesion<sup>20</sup> agenda is also significant. It is a context that is seen as essential to improving life outcomes for young people and the wider community. What is at odds here with other forms of intervention is that the project did not set out to 'organise' a discussion between young people and the police at the outset; rather the desire for it emerged out of a Community of Enquiry. Perhaps then, we can say that Community Philosophy gets results but in a different, potentially more sustainable and far-reaching, way.
- 38 Whether any of this is truly 'transformative' is open to debate. Nevertheless, in the terms identified, the practice of *Community Philosophy* does appear to be able to affect change at a variety of levels, ranging from the attitudes and behaviours of young people to more substantive structural, albeit local, changes in the project's host community.
- 39 That this practice has much in common with the pedagogies that underpin informal and community education, and especially detached youth work (a practice "based on the principle that it works on and from young people's territory - as determined by their definitions of space, needs, interests, concerns and lifestyles"<sup>21</sup>) is perhaps also significant. It suggests that interventions to promote the improved living conditions of young people invariably have an educational context.
- 40 Perhaps, the most identifiable conclusion is of the potential of *Community Philosophy* to be a tool that a range of social professionals might profitably use to engage their service users. As stated immediately above, this implies an educational orientation. As such, CP can support critical analysis both of the issues and problems that emerge through dialogue and the social policy context in which the practitioners' work is based.
- 41 Where these social professionals also use similar philosophical processes, this has a number of supplementary benefits, many of which appear absent elsewhere in the make-up of 'typical' social work interventions. These include learning to value the process of questioning whether the ends to be pursued (simplistically, the aims of the work) are, necessarily, good ones. Through its use, practitioners, it seems, are also likely to become more sympathetic to the voices of those in whose lives they intervene, once again, underlining its democratic credentials.
- 42 Perhaps, it is this re-interpretation of what we take to mean intervention that is most important. Community Philosophy's emphasis on dialogue implies mutuality in learning, rather than the systematic act of 'doing to'. This can be recognised in product-based

models, whereas Community Philosophy places much more value on the process of learning. Dialogue, in this sense, is, (reasonably it seems) defined as a process to which *all* participants commit to with a positive attitude and, ultimately, with the belief that they can learn from each other. While this is challenging for all workers, perhaps this is less so for youth and community workers, disposed as they are, by virtue of their training in informal and community education to the 'Other'<sup>22</sup>. This said, Community Philosophy highlights the extent to which many, so-called, social professionals often behave more like formal educators, and is identified as an area of concern by those intent in drawing upon the best of both practices<sup>23</sup>.

- 43 Whether the study suggests that Community Philosophy is best promoted by existing social professionals rather than specific 'Community Philosophers', as was the case in the Thinking Village project, is open to question. Nonetheless, training in CP is likely to be a positive contribution to the professional development of many social workers and indeed others working in the public sector. This is likely to be more relevant as the emerging social policy agenda now increasingly favours 'integrated working'. Many of these multi-disciplinary teams have failed to invest sufficient time in thinking through the implications of different professionals, with different (and sometimes conflicting) value bases working together.
- 44 The rub is, it seems, that in offering this training social professionals are likely to become increasingly aware of the many constraining dimensions of their agencies. The 'institutional' characteristics of many supposedly 'community' organisations will become more apparent. Social policy agendas then (especially where market-making and commissioning mechanisms dominate<sup>24</sup>) may be revealed to be prescriptive and narrow in terms of mission.
- 45 These points to the need for organisations to reflect on their capacity to work in a democratic manner with their client groups *and* on their own democratic credentials. This implies thinking about both their internal structures and those mechanisms they use to engage with policy makers.
- 46 Where these are found to be inflexible and incapable of responding to what is learnt by staff using *Community Philosophy* methodology, it becomes difficult to support young people (in the tradition of critical pedagogy) in becoming more thoughtful and autonomous.
- 47 This work suggests that improving the life conditions of young people requires fundamental structural change within the very agencies whose aim it is to achieve these outcomes. CP methodology flags up the importance of a strong partnership between young people and those who work to assist them. Community Philosophy represents no single panacea for tackling wider structural inequalities – but it can certainly bolster the efforts of those who make this their aim.
- 48 Beyond this, and especially in a UK context, the profitability of CP also appears constrained by a good deal of heavily prescriptive social policy<sup>25</sup>. This, the project found, creates further constraints within the wider context of improving young people's lives. In its stead, paying due regard to the barriers identified by young people - asking *them* what the barriers are and what *they* say would make *their* lives better - appears both productive and a valuable orientation to all social interventions. Of course, there is often congruence between the issues identified by young people and the social policy agenda. But the significance of engaging young people in a process of articulating their needs cannot be

underestimated. Conversely, many young people express antipathy and sometimes even open hostility to some other policy streams. Invariably, these are the ones that act in a punitive way toward them. 'Community Safety' and the Anti-Social Behaviour agenda, for example, are seen by many young people as mere mechanisms to oppress them, by restricting their freedoms.

## What next for social policy in relation to young people in deprived urban areas? Process versus Product

- 49 This study illustrates the value of, and the need for, social worker initiation of, and involvement in, community-based dialogical activities. Where individuals and communities are encouraged to identify and explore attitudes to, and interpretations of, the range of issues and problems they face, social workers can learn about how they can best intervene. This begs further and, perhaps, more fundamental questions about the relationship between social work and social policy. Is social work always hampered by overly prescribed social policy outcomes? How should social workers respond when, in engaging with young people, they find that there are often contradictions between these desired policy outcomes and the lived reality of young people? Community Philosophy, in contrast, reveals that the issues which dominate their lives, and are seen as problematic by *them*, can only be revealed through dialogue.
- 50 Finally, there are also cultural drivers. Typically, the notion that you have to 'get out to get on' i.e. leave the area you are living in to improve your life, is clearly at odds with a wider policy framework that also values local area regeneration. The study finds that young people are almost always deeply attached to their neighbourhoods, that this is part of their 'good life' and that their understanding of these areas, 'warts and all', is a valuable resource for those whose work it is to facilitate this regeneration. *Community Philosophy* approaches appear to be valuable in encouraging young people's community involvement in these processes. Young people are often dissuaded from getting involved because of the alienating way decision-making structures do business. This should be of concern to many. These structures are invariably hierarchical, high-brow, formal and adversarial. CP, in contrast, and as young people attest, actively encourages collaboration and the scrutiny of issues deemed to be of importance for *that* community. Its value is in supporting inter-generational and young people-service provider dialogue (especially where this is rare, if not absent). CP promotes the value of, and respect for, young people's voices. There are undoubted benefits for their self-esteem. But it also enables them to develop transferable skills through the experience of (and reflection on) their involvement, particularly in thinking critically. This benefits them in helping them to secure - through their own agency - a better life (whether this be based on their 'good life', in which more tangible 'improved living conditions' may or may not be a part). Unlike other interventions that masquerade as autonomy-enhancing, Community Philosophy does appear to equip them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes to make this realisable.
- 51 Abers'<sup>26</sup> account of the 'demonstration effect' consistent with good participatory practice (which is perhaps what CP is) resonates. CP appears to support the motivation and 'buy-in' of young people and that is, perhaps, the key to improving their life conditions. That catalysing this motivation is the greatest challenge for many only goes to illustrate there

is something about Community Philosophy that really hits the spot. The assessment here is that this is its profound democratic character.

- 52 But yet again, it seems inevitable that despite the benefits of CP, there are limits to the impact young people can make on more substantive structural issues and problems. Action in these areas will require a more determined (and indeed democratic) commitment from those with greater power – and a mightier will to work for transformation. Of greatest significance is a realisation that the welfare and flourishing of young people is intrinsically rooted in that of their wider communities. The fact that Community Philosophy benefits all who engage in it is both its greatest strength and, perhaps, its Achilles’ Heel: for it to work it needs to be widespread and deep-rooted.

## End note

- 53 CP is also being trialled in one of the UK’s most deprived urban areas. This programme is in its early stages, but it has already produced many positive outcomes. Initial findings suggest that, in some senses, the young people in this area have become even more engaged than in the Thinking Village: many report that this is because working with CP methodology is so much more engaging than school.

## ANNEXES

### Appendix 1.

<i>From Thinking Village to Learning Community: What are the community learning benefits of shared philosophical dialogue? Themes from Interviews, Stanton, N. (2008)<sup>27</sup></i>			
Group Dynamics	Relationships between old and young	Wider Community Cohesion	Giving Voice

<p>New friends Better at talking Better able to get along with others Can see changes in group's behaviour over time Enjoyment of working in a group Group work skills Listening and communication Questioning skills Group can learn to manage itself over time 'It makes a community to be able to say that you don't know something' - particularly old to young Encourages thinking Confidence in the validity of own contribution Allows for open dialogue Similar learning elements to behaviour mediation Methodology provides a mechanism for positive contributions to dialogue Allows access to those who feel excluded Learning achieved for all who take part</p>	<p>Older people experiencing less fear at shops now that young people smile and wave The confidence to question each other Young people approaching adult volunteers outside of school 'Residents must have noticed the difference' Older people have discovered that young people are different to the stereotypical media portrayal Young people have discovered that older people have something to offer them Mutual enrichment? Space to philosophise together - making sense of the world together, past and present Police getting on better with local young people 'My parents can understand me more' Older people have re-learned how to interact with young people Understanding</p>	<p>Challenging generational stereotypes and media representations Changing views and perceptions - young of old, and old of young (e.g. community picnic) Reducing fear - of young people in groups, of levels of crime and anti-social behaviour Young people understanding that large groups aren't a crime but they can be intimidating - dispersal order conference Matching fear of crime to levels of crime Space to learn the facts and for all ages to contribute their views to discussion - dispersal order conference General tolerance has increased Less complaints to police about anti-social behaviour Changing notions of anti-social behaviour - 'Is football on the street anti-social behaviour?' Change in the nature of complaints reported to Housing staff Drop in groups of young people reported to Housing staff as intimidating</p>	<p>To young people Between generational groups Opening public discourse about community issues Space to think and reflect before reacting Motivation to take action Allowing interaction between community agencies Confidence to ask questions Through rehearsing the methodology, regular participants are better able to communicate in other meetings Methodology in schools allows young people to express their views Building the confidence and capabilities of local young people Equalises power within the group to allow all an equal voice Discourages domination Learning to listen Space for 'safe' dialogue</p>
<p>Sociétés et jeunes en difficulté   2010 'Better than other methods for teaching respect and relationships'</p>	<p>de l'hexagone   2010 between the older and young people who are engaged in the</p>	<p>- learning for the young people, or the adult residents, or both? Increase in</p>	<p>Young people gain in confidence, the ability to articulate their views, and to</p>

## NOTES

1. As a UK-based writer I am aware that the 'European context' for social work has more in common with what we would call 'community work'. Our own 'social workers' have specific legal responsibilities often not shared by their counterparts in other European countries.
2. Arnold, J., Askins, D., Davies, R., Evans, S., Rogers, A. & Taylor, T. (1989) *The Management of Detached Work; How and Why*, Leicester: Youth Clubs UK. p. viii.
3. Hereafter, please note the interchange with the acronym 'CP', as appropriate.
4. Quoted in De Botton, A. (2005) *The Consolations of Philosophy*, London: Penguin.
5. This said, there does appear to be a growing interest in 'practical philosophy', albeit within popular culture. See, for example, 'The Art of Living' series of books, published by Acumen (2008).
6. *Class Action*, Editorial, The Guardian newspaper, 6<sup>th</sup> June 2008.
7. Baggini, J. 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 2008, *Everyday Wisdom*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2008/sep/02/healthandwellbeing.philosophy>.
8. *ibid.* footnote 4.
9. 'Philosophy for Communities' (likewise, P4C) is also in the lexicon, although it should be noted that some practitioners have sought to distinguish between this and *Community Philosophy* - believing the latter to be symbolic of a more democratic 'working with', against, perhaps, the former's more mechanistic 'giving' or, it could be argued, 'doing to' those who are worked with.
10. The works of Mathew Lipman include: (1988) "Critical *Thinking*: What can it be?" *Educational Leadership*, pp. 38-41 and (1991) *Thinking in Education*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
11. A point made in Tiffany, G.A. (2008) *Detached Youth Work and Democratic Education*, <http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/cgi/documents/documents.cgi?t=template.htm&a=192>
12. Especially now as a great deal of youth work is increasingly 'programme-led' in order to fulfil the specified demands of social policy. See Tiffany, G.A. (2007) *Reconnecting Detached Youth Work: Guidelines for Standards and Excellence*, Leicester: Federation for Detached Youth Work.
13. See, for example, Jeffs, T. & Smith, M. (eds.) (1990) *Using Informal Education. An Alternative to Casework, Teaching and Control?* Buckingham: Open University Press.
14. See Haynes, J. (2002) *Children as Philosopher. Learning through enquiry and dialogue in the primary classroom*, London: Routledge Falmer, p. 106.
15. JRF is an independent development and social research charity, supporting a wide programme of research and development projects in housing, social care and social welfare. See <http://www.jrf.org.uk/>
16. <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/evaluation-contracted-community-policing-experiment>
17. A Dispersal Order is a power available to the police under The Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003. This gives them authority to disperse groups of two or more from a designated area where their presence or behaviour has resulted, or is likely to result, in a member of the public being harassed, intimidated, alarmed or distressed. Dispersal Orders have also been the subject of JRF research: <http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/use-and-impact-dispersal-orders>
18. It has always been impressed on the young people that talking to others is a form of action. This is in contrast to cultural attitudes such as that implied by the popular refrain: "all talk and no action."
19. Davies, R. & Dart, J. (2005) *The Most Significant Change (MSC) technique: A guide to its use*. [www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.htm](http://www.mande.co.uk/docs/MSCGuide.htm). MSC is a participative, story-based monitoring and evaluation technique that promotes dialogue between stakeholders. These stakeholders are involved both in deciding the sorts of change to be recorded and in analysing the data. The

process involves the collection of critical 'significant change' stories emanating from the field and the systematic selection of the most significant of these stories by the stakeholders.

20. A social policy driver that underpins all youth and community work in England at the time of writing.

21. Federation for Detached Youth Work (2007) *Detached Youth Work Guidelines*, Leicester: Federation for Detached Youth Work, p. 11.

22. Sampson, E.E. (1993) *Celebrating the Other. A Dialogical Account of Human Nature*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

23. Recent efforts have been made to stimulate discussion on this subject by drawing attention to the potential for integrating youth and community work knowledge, skills and values into mainstream schooling. See Tiffany, G.A. (2008) *Lessons from Detached Youth Work: Democratic Education*, Nuffield Review Issues Paper 11. <http://www.nuffield14-19review.org.uk/cgi/documents/documents.cgi?t=template.htm&a=192>

24. Griffin, C. (2002) *Lifelong Learning and welfare reform* in Edwards, R., Miller, N., Small, N. & Tait, A. (eds.) *Supporting Lifelong Learning: Volume 1. Perspectives on Learning*, London: Routledge Falmer. In this, Griffin suggests a neo-liberal model of welfare reform is emerging that involves the removal of state welfare support in favour of promoting economic independence through learning. It might be argued, on the one hand, that the interrogative potential of Community Philosophy reveals this to be the case, and yet, on the other, that CP is, itself, congruent with this neo-liberal agenda. Perhaps, to offer a tentative conclusion, we might say this depends on *what* is learnt? Formalised models tend to value more highly instrumental knowledge; in contrast, CP is much more symbolic of informal learning and, implicitly then, a value base in which *social* learning is elevated in status. This is learning that has moral, ethical and democratic dimensions, and is counter to the orientation of neo-liberalism toward the individual. Equally, the mantra of 'personalised learning' (so favoured in the dominant economic paradigm) has a similar hue; is personalisation no more than the ultimate privatisation of learning – something that depoliticises education to such a degree that it is no longer a force for *social* emancipation ... and transformation?

25. I spoke about this at an earlier ERCSW seminar (*Lessons from the street: Informal education-based social ties building and the danger of pre-prescription*) - so its return to my line of sight in this study has been very interesting.

26. See Abers, R. (2000a) *Inventing Local Democracy: Grassroots Politics in Brazil*. London: Lynne Rienner and (2000b) *Overcoming the Dilemmas of Participatory Democracy: The Participatory Budget Policy in Porto Alegre, Brazil*. Electronic book (Projecto Democracia Participativa).

27. Unpublished

## RÉSUMÉS

La Philosophie Communautaire est une nouvelle méthodologie dérivée d'une approche éducative nommée 'Philosophy for Children'(P4C). P4C est pratiquée dans les écoles depuis plusieurs années mais c'est seulement récemment qu'elle a été adaptée à un contexte d'intervention sociale communautaire. Des jeunes se servent d'un stimulus - par exemple une image - comme point de départ pour une 'Enquête Communautaire'. L'intervenant social, formé à la philosophie communautaire anime l'exploration approfondie des questions et des problèmes rencontrés par



les jeunes. La clef du processus est que ce sont les jeunes eux-mêmes qui décident des questions à examiner et qui sont encouragés à engager la conversation avec les autres d'une manière à la fois critique et coopérative.

Cet article étudie les résultats d'un projet ayant pour but de promouvoir la Philosophie Communautaire. L'étude a eu lieu dans un environnement où s'expriment beaucoup de comportements dits antisociaux (réels ou simplement perçus comme tels). Le projet a permis de faciliter le dialogue entre des habitants jeunes et âgés (souvent peu tolérants les uns envers les autres) et également entre jeunes et autorités, par exemple la police.

L'étude a trouvé que les jeunes apprécient l'opportunité de travailler avec cette méthodologie et qu'elle leur permet d'explorer de façon critique les problèmes qui les touchent et les concernent comme eux identifient ces problèmes. Plusieurs projets ont produit un sentiment positif chez les jeunes, quoique ce sentiment positif semble avoir plutôt à faire avec une amélioration dans leur condition de vie matérielle, surtout une amélioration dans leurs rapports avec les adultes de la communauté et avec la police.

Un résultat imprévu pour les intervenants qui ont utilisé cette méthodologie est qu'ils ont trouvé que les contraintes de la politique sociale et institutionnelle ont rendu difficile de réagir d'une manière aussi flexible qu'escompté dans la Philosophie Communautaire.

Cela pose des problèmes pour la formation des intervenants - la démocratisation des organismes dans un contexte qui actuellement mène à des résultats hautement prescrits. Si on n'adopte pas une approche philosophique dans toutes les branches de l'intervention sociale, l'efficacité de PC à développer chez les jeunes l'estime de soi et la capacité de réfléchir sera limitée.

En conclusion, la Philosophie Communautaire n'est pas en soi un mécanisme qui transforme, mais plutôt un outil pour aider à préparer les jeunes gens à devenir autonomes et à participer de droit à leur propre développement.

Community Philosophy (CP) is a new methodology adapted from an educational approach called *Philosophy for Children* (P4C). P4C has been used in schools for many years but only recently adapted by social workers for use in a community context. Groups of young people use a stimulus, typically an image, as a starting point for a *Community of Enquiry*. In this, the social worker, trained as a CP facilitator, encourages deep exploration of the issues and problems affecting the young people. Key to the process is that young people determine the questions to be examined and are encouraged to engage with each others' opinions in a critical and collaborative manner.

The study explores the findings of a project set up specifically to promote Community Philosophy. The context of the work is one of an area with high levels of antisocial behaviour (both perceived and real). The project facilitated dialogue between young people and older residents (of whom many were intolerant toward them) and also between young people and service providers e.g. the police.

The study found that the young people valued highly the opportunity to work with this methodology. It enabled them to explore critically issues and problems affecting them and as *identified by them*. Several of these enquiries translated into tangible benefits for the young people although these had more to do with improving their sense of well-being than their material life conditions. Foremost were improved relationships with adults in the community and with the police.

An unanticipated outcome was the challenges that arose for the workers using this methodology. Institutional constraints and social policy prescriptions, it emerged, made it difficult to respond in the flexible manner that Community Philosophy seems to demand.

This poses further questions for the training of workers, the democratisation of organisations and the process of working to deliver often highly prescribed social policy outcomes. Without a philosophical approach in all areas of social intervention, the effectiveness of CP in building

young people's self-esteem and transferable critical thinking skills can be inhibited.

Ultimately, Community Philosophy is not so much a mechanism that can deliver more fundamental transformation; instead, it can be seen as a tool that can inform the action that needs to be taken in order to assist young people in becoming autonomous and learning to become agents of change in their own right.

La Filosofía Comunitaria es una nueva metodología que deriva de un enfoque educativo llamado 'Philosophy for Children'(P4C). P4C se practica en las escuelas desde hace muchos años, pero sólo recientemente ha sido adaptada a un contexto de intervención social comunitaria. Los jóvenes utilizan un estímulo (por ejemplo, una imagen) como punto de partida para una "encuesta comunitaria". El interventor social, formado según la filosofía comunitaria, coordina la exploración profundizada de las cuestiones y problemas que enfrentan los jóvenes. La clave del proceso es que son los jóvenes mismos los que deciden las cuestiones a examinar y son alentados a mantener conversaciones con los demás de una manera crítica y cooperativa a la vez. Este artículo estudia los resultados de un proyecto cuyo objetivo fue promover la Filosofía Comunitaria. El estudio tuvo lugar en un entorno donde se expresan muchos comportamientos llamados antisociales (reales o simplemente percibidos como tales). El proyecto ha permitido facilitar el diálogo entre habitantes jóvenes y mayores (a menudo poco tolerantes los unos hacia los otros), y también entre jóvenes y autoridades, por ejemplo, la policía. El estudio ha descubierto que los jóvenes aprecian la oportunidad de trabajar con esta metodología que les permite explorar de manera crítica los problemas que les afectan y les conciernen, tal y como ELLOS identifican esos problemas. Varios proyectos han producido un sentimiento positivo en los jóvenes, aunque ese sentimiento positivo parece tener más que ver con una mejora en su condición de vida material, en especial una mejora en sus relaciones con los adultos de la comunidad y con la policía. Un resultado imprevisto para estos interventores que han utilizado esta metodología es que las restricciones de la política social e institucional han dificultado reaccionar de manera flexible y prevista en la Filosofía Comunitaria. Esto presenta problemas para la formación de los interventores: la democratización de los organismos en un contexto que actualmente produce resultados altamente prescritos. Si no se adopta un enfoque filosófico en todas las ramas de la intervención social, la eficacia de PC a desarrollar en los jóvenes, la autoestima y la capacidad de reflexionar serán limitadas. Como conclusión, la Filosofía Comunitaria no es en sí misma un mecanismo que transforma, sino más bien una herramienta para ayudar a preparar a los jóvenes a hacerse autónomos y a participar de pleno derecho en su propio desarrollo.

## INDEX

**Keywords :** Community, philosophy, youth work, community of Enquiry, dialogue

**Mots-clés :** Communauté, philosophie, intervention sociale auprès des jeunes, enquête communautaire

**Palabras claves :** comunidad, filosofía, diálogo, intervención social ante los jóvenes, encuesta comunitaria

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As Vice-Chair of the Federation for Detached Youth Work, Graeme represents the UK in Dynamo International, an international network of street educators. He is the author of *Reconnecting Detached Youth Work: Guidelines and Standards for Excellence* (2007) and *Learning from detached youth work: democratic education* (2008), published by the Nuffield Review of 14-19 education, for which he has been a Core Group member and advisor to its *Engaging Youth Enquiry*.

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