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Youth Work: A 2020 vision

Editorial Introduction

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Future commentators looking back on the first decade of the 21st century will undoubtedly be drawn to accounts of the unprecedented political, economic and social changes that have come to define this epoch. Across the UK, the effect of economic austerity has been felt no more acutely than in local youth work services.

Youth work has been placed on the back foot. More and more, the sector must effectively respond to the primacies of government policy whilst also meeting the often-contrasting needs of young people in local communities. Such a task is made more challenging by diminishing resources. This is a tall order, with the added requirement demanded of practitioners to increasingly demonstrate outcomes and impact of their practice intervention in this context. Seemingly against the odds, youth work endures.

The publication of this collection of work is timely. The papers confirm and reflect the events of recent years and showcase evidence of the ensuing challenges for the youth work sector, as well as respective issues arising in the lives and lifestyles of young people. The opening paper by Bernard Davies reminds us of the importance of tracking the historical evolution of youth work and the ever-changing relationship it has with the policy and politics of the state. Change it seems is inevitable, whilst continuity for youth work practice in terms of purpose and values is subjected to periodic scrutiny regardless of the dominant ideology at any given time. In other words, we have been here before, but for Davies the political future and that of youth work is far from certain.

The discrete practice sector in Scotland is critically examined by Annette Coburn and Sinead Gormally. Austerity has been felt UK-wide, however the position of youth work in Scotland appears on more solid footing compared to England. Despite this, the paper

points to embedded contradictions in the sector between current policy and the traditions and principles of practice. The authors contend that the context demands further scrutiny to help determine future priorities for youth work.

The central role of local government in the management of youth work services is the subject of Tony Taylor's contribution. Through an annotated review of his own CV stretching back to the 1960s, we get insight to the influence over decades of pervasive neo-liberal concerns and the emergent adoption of new public management. Through understanding the forces at play over time, valuable lessons can be learned about contemporary relations between the respective local government and third sectors.

A common thread running through this collection is the agency of young people; participation has been a longstanding central tenet of youth work practice. The case study presented by Christina McMellon confirms the potential of young people in acting on issues that concern them, in this instance gender inequality. The reflective learning and development of these young people is testimony to the power of the youth work process.

The voices of contemporary practitioners are captured in the interview data presented by Mel Aitken and Mae Shaw. Whilst the interviewees bemoan the varied challenges of the current context, they also shine a light on the essential role that youth work plays in engaging with young people on the margins through building long-term trusting relationships.

The final paper from Alan Mackie presents a somewhat bleak picture for some young people embarking upon post-school transition. We are reminded of the importance of 'place' as a marker of identity and a source of support in the lives of contemporary youth. More positively, this paper presents a clear challenge in terms of how youth work practitioners can support young people through the arduous teenage years. A key emergent question is how we support young people to become and continue to be the 'agentic players' in their own neighbourhoods and communities.

These are complex times for youth work; the historical legacy and contemporary issues faced by practitioners are brought into sharp focus through this collection of papers. Taken together they present a topical resource to help in shaping our future vision for the practice sector.