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Young People, Youth Work & the 'Levelling Up' Policy Agenda

Bernard Davies & Jon Ord

Abstract

'Levelling UP' has taken on considerable significance in the policy discourses of the Johnson conservative government, particularly regarding the English regions. However, what is meant by Levelling up has been far from clear, although if it is to mean anything it must at least in part mean addressing the needs of disadvantaged and left behind communities. Key premises of this paper are that young people must be considered valued members of those communities; and that, to meet their expressed needs, youth work can be the best placed service for (re)investment, not least because it has demonstrated that it consistently enables a wide variety of outcomes in their lives. The investment required must be seen in the context of the huge austerity cuts to youth services in England which disproportionately affected disadvantaged communities. To make the case for 'levelling up' to completely rebuild as well as further develop those services. This paper brings together an analysis of past and current youth policies with a range of relevant empirical data.

Introduction

A premise of this paper is that the needs of young people have been consistently ignored in local, regional, and central government policy discourses over the last decade not least because austerity has disproportionately affected young people's services – particularly in out of school settings such as children's centres and youth work which have received devastating cuts (Davies, 2018). The paper argues that young people must not be forgotten in the levelling up agenda - as they are the next generation - and if levelling up is to have a meaningful impact on the lives of young people in deprived communities throughout the UK resources must be targeted at them. (Adcock, 2021). The paper will chart the development of youth work since its golden age of the Albemarle period of the 1960's where the welfare consensus ensured unprecedented investment in and commitment to young people and

youth services. It will then demonstrate the devastating impact of austerity upon these services. This is followed by a presentation of the range of outcomes that youth work enables, clearly demonstrating the significant impact that youth work can, and does, have on the lives of young people in a variety of ways. It will then conclude that unless 'levelling up' addresses the needs of young people in the kinds of ways that youth work has done consistently in the past 70 plus years, regardless of any broader successes of the levelling up agenda, young people will remain left behind.

Firstly, however we must consider what is meant by levelling up?

What is 'Levelling Up'

Newman (2021: pp 312-320) suggests the term 'levelling up' has been in use in political discourse since the 19th Century. Nor in the past has it been the sole preserve of the Conservative Party, with for example New Labour Secretary of State for Education and Employment David Blunkett arguing that his policy on Further Education was an attempt at 'levelling up, not levelling down' (House of Commons, 2000, 6th ser, Vol 347, col. 51).

However, levelling up has recently taken on a central role in policy discourse within the Johnson premiership. Newman suggests that the 'levelling up agenda' has been used as a specific device to communicate to the public the broad intentions of the government's policy programme. Levelling up has therefore gained significant impetus as a political 'slogan'. Newman goes on to suggest however that the levelling up vision is fundamentally misleading as it fails to clearly state its ideological position. The levelling up agenda can be characterised in a variety of ideological perspectives which are at odds with each other, as Newman explains:

It speaks to social democrats about tackling deprivation; it speaks to social liberals about equality of opportunity; it speaks to economic liberals about supporting the free market; and it speaks to conservatives about reuniting the nation.

(Newman, 2021: 312)

McCann & Ortega-Argilés (2021: p545-564) concur that: 'there is considerable ambiguity and a lack of clarity regarding the nature and form which levelling up processes should take' (2021: 545). They suggest that what they describe as the 'geographies of discontent' which

have underpinned contemporary political discourse in the context of UK - which played no small part in the wave of support for Brexit - are associated with a range of regional inequalities. Though all neatly wrapped up in the notion of levelling up, these conflicting political and economic narratives must be unpacked and provided with sufficient clarity if levelling up is to materialise into something substantive and for something meaningful to result from it.

It certainly appears to be the case that levelling up is not a mere empty slogan. Boris Johnson has described it as a 'moral mission' while on a visit to South Shields; 'as well as a necessary move for the economy' (Shields Gazette, 2021: p 1) Levelling up gets 19 specific references in the spending review of 2020, where it is initially linked to recovery across the whole of the UK as a result of the pandemic. However, its primary aims appear: 'to level up education standards'; 'to level up opportunity'; 'level up economic opportunity'; 'level up productivity' as well as 'to deliver first-class frontline public services' (HM Treasury, 2020) This process will be achieved in part through the creation of the Levelling Up Fund of £4.8 billion which was announced at the 2020 Spending Review, which will run from 2021/22 to 2024/25. The aim of the Levelling Up Fund is to:

Invest in local infrastructure that has a visible impact on people and their communities... and drive regeneration in places in need, those facing particular challenges, and areas that have received less government investment in recent years. (FENEWS, 2020).

All areas of the UK are able to access the Levelling Up Funding, including Unitary authorities, London borough councils and district councils. Whilst some bids are ringfenced for transport - and that clearly has been given some priority - bids of 'all types' are encouraged, presumably to meet the priorities outlined in the: 'Spending Review to continue to level up opportunity for communities across the UK' (FENEWS, 2020).

Two questions remain, however. The broader one is whether the current levelling up policies will address those deep structural inequalities defined for example by class, race and gender which the pandemic has again exposed and indeed exacerbated.

A second question of special concern for this paper is: will the implementation of the Levelling Up Fund, and the wider levelling up policy agenda, treat young people as legitimate and equally valued members of their communities? Stein & Frost (1992) characterised young people as a systematically disempowered group who are consistently ignored and deprioritised. This paper challenges this new policy agenda to not make the same mistake again. There are glimmers of hope that this will not happen with young people at least implicitly being included in the remit of levelling up as, for example, the fourth 'levelling up goal' identifies: 'Access to the right advice and experiences at the right time to unlock opportunity *throughout a person's life*' (authors' emphasis) (Levelling up Goals, 2021).

Levelling Up and Youth Work

As this article was being complete two documents appeared with focuses on levelling up : a White Paper setting out the government's plans for implementing its levelling up policies (HM Government, 2022) and a Digital, Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) report on the findings of and the government's responses to a Youth Review carried out in 2021.

In a 16-page Executive Summary the White Paper has just one paragraph on '... youth facilities, services and experiences in England...' (page 14). Drawing on proposals in the DCMS paper, this talks of providing a £560 million 'investment' in those services – funding which, far from new, has been on offer since September 2019 and has apparently been left largely unspent (Simpson, 2021; Merrick, 2021). It also makes clear that key priorities for the DCMS's proposed National Youth Guarantee are to 'ensure the Duke of Edinburgh Award is offered to every state secondary school in England' and to 'give more students the transformative opportunity to join the cadets (by) providing more support to the state school sector to increase Combined Cadet Force participation.'

Though there are a number of references to levelling up in the DCMS report itself, most are made in passing and come over as token. Alongside money to be allocated to the National Citizens Service (£171 million over three years), unformed youth groups and volunteering activities, the nearest it comes to making its offer to open youth work real is to promise that over the next three years £360 million will be used to 'deliver up to 300 new and

refurbished youth spaces and services for the country's most left-behind areas'. (Pp 3, 8). This offer, however – which, we note, comes only with an 'up to 300' promise - has to be seen against the background of austerity cuts which have resulted since 2012 in over 760 youth centres being closed. (Unison, 2018).

The Rise and Fall - and Survival - of Youth Work

A later section of this paper presents arguments for prioritising levelling up funding towards youth work based on an appreciation of the significant outcomes youth work can produce. There is however another equally compelling argument, which is based on consideration of the systematic dismantling of UK youth services over the last decade (Davies, 2018). To appreciate this a short historical journey is necessary to set this demise in context.

The origins of youth work lie in what is commonly referred to as the voluntary or charitable sector, a key marker of which was the formation of the YMCA in 1844 (Heasmen, 1962, p 110). Other significant milestones in the late 19th and early 20th centuries included the development of girls work by Maud Stanley who sought: 'to enoble the class to which they [the young girls] belong' (Stanley, 1890: 63). And the boys' clubs developed by Basil Henriques, which he explicitly described as 'educational centres' which members attended 'in order voluntarily to learn' (Henriques, 1933: 7).

The main development and expansion of state youth work took place around the time of the second world war. Board of Education Circular 1486 issued in November 1939 proposed that 'the service of youth' was 'a too long neglected part of the education field' whose role was to contribute to 'the social and physical development of boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 20, who had ceased to be in full-time education'. (Board of Education, 1939: Paras 1, 8). Circular 1516, released seven months later, set the 'general aim' for both local authorities and the still highly influential voluntary organisations as providing young people with 'social and physical training' (Board of Education, 1940: Para 2). These aims were reinforced by the Board's white paper *Educational Reconstruction*, published in July 1943 which acknowledged that the Service had shown 'a remarkable expansion' with 'a far higher proportion than at any previous time of young people associated with healthy leisure-time training and recreation'. Particularly significant for youth work's longer-term development was its recognition that this was happening 'without compulsion or regimentation of any kind' (Board of Education, 1943: Para 91).

One of the seminal moments for 'statutory' youth work resulted from the 1944 Education Act which notionally enshrined the state's commitment to youth work in legislation. However, the Act only referred to this burgeoning new service as offering: 'leisure time occupation ... for any person over compulsory school age', which left local authority Youth Services so weakly embedded in the post-war welfare state that by the end of the 1950s their very survival was in doubt. It took the highly influential Albemarle Committee report of 1960 to significantly re-energise and expand the youth service in England and Wales (Ministry of Education, 1960). Responding explicitly to the then emerging 'teenage culture' of a generation of young people who it 'expected in the future to be ... more exacting in their demands', the Committee gave the practice itself a much sharper focus. It for example explicitly rejected the goal of: 'some hypothetical condition of "adjustment" to individual and social life', re-endorsing instead the personally developmental purpose set out by a former Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Education, Sir John Maud:

To offer individual young people in their leisure time opportunities ... to discover their personal resources of body, mind and spirit and thus better equip themselves to live the life of mature, creative and responsible members of a free society (Ministry of Education, 1960: paras 81; 134)

For implementing these aspirations, the Report recommended a 10-year Youth Service development programme. This included setting up a Development Council to advise the minister; a building programme which by the end of the decade had resulted in over 3000 new youth centres; establishing an emergency training college to increase the number of full-time youth workers from 700 to 1300 by 1966, with the actual number reaching 1500 by 1968; employing more part-time workers; and providing more revenue and capital support for voluntary youth organisations (Department for Education and Science, 1969, paras 22, 24, 25).

Though after Albemarle national policies and structures in the four UK countries developed in different ways, the youth service became a small but significant aspect of education policy and practice throughout the UK and influential reports continued to be commissioned by the central government departments with responsibility for education. For example, one covering England and Wales - *Youth and Community Work in the 70s* (Department for Education and Science, 1969: para 152; see also Chapter VIII) suggested that within 'the active society', balances of power be shifted in young people's direction. It also proposed that youth workers encourage young people's 'critical involvement in their community' – a perspective advocated by two Scottish Education Department reports (Scottish Education

Department, 1968, 1975), which had continuing impact on local policies and the development of youth work practice. The theme of social education echoed by both the 'Albemarle report' and '*Youth and Community Work in the 70s*' was continued within the next major report on England's Youth Service, '*Experience and Participation*' published in 1982, which also emphasised 'the personal development of young people' (Department for Education and Science, 1986: para 3.2).

The post-welfarist period of UK social policy which began with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 (Clarke et al, 2000), brought a number of challenges to local Youth Services which at best left them and open access youth work badly neglected. These not only included pressures to reduce public expenditure, felt especially by the local authorities running those services. Foreshadowing ones introduced later by New Labour governments (see below), Thatcherite policies treated childcare services 'as an integral part of the national pattern of law and order' and so as needing to concentrate on 'juvenile delinquency'. Prioritised, too, was the increasing number of young people left unemployed by a severe economic downturn (Davies, 1999).

With increasing targeting of 'youth services' towards young people labelled 'vulnerable', 'at risk' or 'anti-social', from the 1990s managerialist top-down government policies sought increasingly to refocus youth work on the kinds of individualised 'adjustment' explicitly rejected within the Albemarle era. Increasing expectations also emerged requiring 'measured' evidence that 'hard' outcomes had been achieved. In response, a range of youth work groups and organisations mounted a sustained defence of the practice's core educational commitments (See Davies, 2019, Chapter 17) with one manager in 2009 for example insisting that, though open to collaborating with other agencies, this had to be done 'without compromising the values of social education' (Davies & Merton, 2009: p 35). Despite these tensions however a broad commitment to the educational value of youth work remained. For example, an enquiry in England concluded in 1991 that 'the educational values of the youth service make an Education Department location the best approach in principle' and that 'it is rarely argued that the youth service outside Education should be other than educational...' (Department for Education and Science, 1991: paras 4, 205). However, in July 2013 the responsibility for youth work was first moved to the Cabinet office and then to the Dept for Media Culture and Sport (Puffet, 2013), the significance of which is characteristic of the demise which was to follow.

Youth work and austerity

By 2020, local authorities have faced a reduction to core funding from the Government of nearly £16 billion over the preceding decade, resulting in councils losing 60p out of every £1 the Government had provided for spending on local services. The next year, 168 councils received no revenue support grant at all (Local Government Association, 2018, p 1). It was in this overall context that by 2018, as their budgets were reduced by at least £400 million, many local authorities had wound down or completely removed their Youth Services. Even before account is taken of any impacts on voluntary sector organisations (many of which had received grants from local authorities), this resulted in those 760+ youth centres being closed and more than 4,500 youth work jobs lost (Unison, 2018). Though statutory guidance in England - an echo of the original commitment from the 1944 Education Act - laid down a requirement that councils '... secure sufficient Youth Service facilities in their area', an explicit 'get-out' clause allowed them to do this only 'so far as (is) reasonably practicable' (National Youth Agency, 2020: 1-2).

In the later years of austerity, a House of Commons Select Committee and two All Party Parliamentary Groups of MPs drew attention to the damage done to a generation of young people by these Youth Service cuts. Their reports often concentrated on the more negative effects - particularly what they saw as the consequential growth in knife crime and county lines drug activities and in young people's mental health problems. One of the Committees, however, stated bluntly that youth work's task was not to 'fix a problem' but to offer '... a distinct educational process ... to support a young person's personal and social development' (APPG on Youth Affairs, 2018, p2).

In his Budget statement in October 2021 the Chancellor claimed to be starting to repair this damage by promising £560 million for 'youth services'. However, as we noted earlier, far from being new money as he suggested, most of it - £500 million or nearly 90 per cent - was in effect the third 'launch' of the September 2019 Youth Investment Fund (Simpson, 2021) . Moreover, over the three years for which the £560 million was allocated, one-third (£173 million) was to go to the National Citizens Service - a scheme which till then was offering short residential and 'social action' experiences to just 16- and 17-year olds (ibid).

From a young person's perspective, a more realistic picture of the youth work gap needing to be filled by 2021 can be projected from the findings of a report published in 2013 by the now defunct National Council for Voluntary Youth Services. These showed that that year over 9 per cent of 10-15 year olds were using a youth club most nights of the week and nearly 29 per cent at least once a week. This suggests that open youth work was then reaching some 1.5 million young people (National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, 2014) - and that is before the 16-19 year olds are taken into account or those who might have been in contact with detached workers. Not only by 2021 will those numbers clearly have plunged steeply. It would not be unsurprising if many young people in the current teenage generation no longer knew what a local youth club is or even that such a facility once existed.

Highly significantly – in the context of 'levelling up' – new evidence emerged in November 2021 in the preliminary findings of a census of youth work facilities carried out by the National Youth Agency (NYA, 2021). Of the local youth work provision which had survived '... twice as much ... (was) in the most affluent areas as opposed to the most deprived' and '... twice as many buildings purpose-built for, or dedicated towards, young people (were) in affluent areas'. Ninety per cent of the identified facilities were '... units of national uniformed organisations, especially those affiliated to Scouts and Girlguiding'. Voluntary organisations were '... disproportionately providing (and being commissioned by local authorities to provide) universal (that is open access) services...' with '15% of upper-tier and unitary local authorities ... offer(ing) no direct delivery...'

The Outcomes of Youth Work

Those unfamiliar with youth work may well ask why it should be given special merit. For many people, including many politicians, the images which 'youth work' seems to conjure up - of 'ping-pong' tables and boxing rings, coffee bars, loud music and dancing teenagers - hardly suggest a practice with much to contribute to 'levelling-up'. Yet, though its leisure spaces and activities have always been a main draw for young people – and though its quality has varied - throughout its nearly 200 year-history its sponsors and practitioners have aspired to providing a distinctive practice offering much more than recreational distraction. Furthermore, despite the ravages of the austerity years have had on youth work a presentation of some of the latest research which identifies the range of youth work outcomes goes some considerable way to make the case for its prioritisation within the levelling up policy agenda.

However, before doing that a brief explanation of youth work is provided for those unfamiliar with its unique educational practices.

Youth work is a person-centred practice (Ord, 2016) underpinned by voluntary participation - that is, it occurs in spaces and places that young people choose to frequent (Davies, 2021). This creates an important dynamic which structures power into both the relationships between youth workers and young people, and throughout the setting. That young people can both choose to attend - as well as choose to leave means youth workers must attend to the needs, concerns, and interests of young people, otherwise they will literally walk out of the door. It is voluntary participation which helps ensure youth work is relevant to young people. On this basis youth work is a developmental educational practice which 'starts where young people are at' (Davies, 2021), which as Banks (2010: 10) describes, aims:

To enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential.

'Youth work is [therefore] a distinct educational process' (NYA 2021) whose activities – whether it be dance or drama, sports or art and crafts - are 'the means rather than the end and whose primary focus is the social and emotional development of the young person (ibid).

This distinction between process and product is important and has often meant outside observers have missed the subtle significance of youth work - mistakenly assuming that young people are merely cooking or playing football and so not appreciating the educational process unfolding within, and through, the activity. In 2004, front-line youth worker Jeremy Brent (2004: 69-73) succinctly captured this dilemma of evidencing youth work's impact and outcomes:

...in rejecting the current managerial vocabulary of an outcome-led approach, there is a danger of denying that good youth work actually does have very powerful achievements. (P 69)

After then noting '... a constant concern that youth work should be directed towards process...' , he nonetheless concluded that '... the "products" of youth work should not be undervalued, as they can be intrinsic to the "process"'.

Brent illustrated such ‘process-generated’ impacts with two narrative accounts of young people’s voluntary participation in his centre. One traces 15-year old Kelly’s six-month journey from first arriving ‘look(ing) miserable and unhappy’, via a variety of conversations with one of the workers, to the evening when she smiled at Brent even though she still hardly knew him. It was obvious to the youth workers that a ‘profound transformation had taken place’ as a result of Kelly having ‘thrown herself into the life of the club’. The other example records how, collectively, members helped design and construct an arch to commemorate members who had died in accidents and from drug overdoses and natural causes. The project enabled a variety of outcomes, from supporting the grieving process to a reflection and reorientation of young people’s own behaviour.

More recently Doherty and de St Croix (2019) have also given attention to evidencing the outcomes of youth work’s process-based practice. Drawing on the initial findings of a three-year research project, they demonstrate that youth work evaluation is ‘clearly rooted in the needs and realities’ of young people’s lives. Their evaluation captures and values ‘both the everyday and the remarkable elements’ of the youth work practice. For example, in a film made as part of their research, young people attending three youth clubs in different parts of England provide vivid testimony of the personal and collective impacts of such a practice:

The youth workers focus on what you need

I make new friends at the club ...

I can get creative ... do activities...

(The club’s)... about how we could improve the area with ideas we could put to the councils.

In exploring how open access youth work might contribute to ‘levelling up’ agendas, what follows is an explication of recent research on the impact of youth work and the kinds of outcomes it can and does produce, three carried out in England, and one in five European countries.

- **The Youth Investment Fund - impacts and outcomes**

In May 2021 New Philanthropy Capital and the Centre for Youth Impact published a series of reports on the outcomes of the Youth Investment Fund (Scanlon et al, 2020; New Philanthropy Capital, 2021). With £40 million from the Department of Digital, Media, Culture and Sport and the National Lottery, between 2017 and 2020 this funded ninety organisations in England – some of which described open access provision as ‘the very foundation of all our work’ - to run youth work programmes which attracted 400,000 young

people. Some of the organisations involved which had been able to expand detached work because of YIF funding highlighted the role this played in reaching not currently engaged young people by 'going on to their territory, rather than expecting them to come to us'. (Youth Worker) ((Scanlon et al, 2020, p 14).

The programmes were carried out in six disadvantaged areas in England including Bristol and Somerset, East London, Liverpool and Tees Valley and Sunderland.

Some young people are scared to go out, or their parents are scared... in this community sometimes it's hard for girls to be given the freedom to go out... (Youth worker) ((Scanlon et al, 2020, p 12)

Youth workers spoke about the challenge that some young people faced as a result of ingrained poverty in their family and community that left some without positive adult role models, and a perceived lack of control over their future. (Scanlon et al, 2020, p 13). They also recorded that the young people in the areas were 'restricted by perceived social and geographical boundaries'. (Scanlon et al, 2020, p 13).

The 'process evaluation' element of the research found that - though less successful with young women, especially those from Black and Asian backgrounds – 'universal provision overall played an important initial engagement role'. Three specific outcomes highlighted were:

- Success in reaching and engaging young people in positive activities and informal learning opportunities.
- The involvement of a broad range of young people many of whom are living in some of the most deprived areas of the country.
- That around a fifth of those who participated started with poor wellbeing.

Approximately three months into the programmes, more specific findings from twelve of the projects recorded a range of 'statistically significant impacts'. These related to 'social skills, self-confidence, leadership, communication and self-expression, social connectedness and happiness and wellbeing'. On some of these outcomes, young people who had started with 'low social and emotional learning skill profiles' made greater gains than those with high skill profiles.

- **'Walking interviews' in Brighton: evaluating 'the most significant change'**

A report on research in Brighton by the Centre for Education and Youth (CEY) released in July 2021 (Angus, 2021; added significant detail to the Youth Investment Fund evidence – often in young people’s own voice. Using ‘walking interviews’, it also highlighted why, rather than equating ‘youth work’ with ‘youth club work’, detached and outreach work merits a much higher profile, especially in the current Covid-19 conditions.

The research’s analysis of 41 responses to the question: ‘For you what’s changed the most after spending time with street-based youth workers?’ provided some potentially relevant messages for drawing young people into ‘levelling-up’ activities. A bottom-line expectation – indeed requirement - was of course that they could actually get access to youth work facilities:

You (the youth workers) come to us, we don’t have to go to services.

There’s not enough youth centres around the place. They’re all in the outskirts areas, nothing in the city to go to...

Assuming this access was available – and used - perhaps the most important practice message from the young people was how they valued the relationships with the workers:

Someone I could trust.

(They) are understanding and non-judgemental.

A range of personal gains flowing from these relationships was also identified, with 71% of those interviewed mentioning support and safeguarding as, for them, the biggest change coming out of their time with youth workers:

So everything I know about mental health and stuff is from my youth worker.

It’s good to know about sexual health and knowing we can get C-cards (access to contraception) from (the youth workers).

Closely linked to these, young people identified help to stay safe and out of trouble:

They helped me understand what’s polite and what’s not polite.

You actually learn from youth workers a lot. And change the mentality when you’re actually out and about with your mates and you see stuff happening...

They ... taught me ... some street-smart skills ... I you see a dodgy area, avoid it...

It's helpful with the Covid situation, they give out masks and hand sanitisers...

The young people also recognised some more tangible outcomes – such as negotiating routes into further education, training and jobs.

I saw youth workers about and then we did my CV.

... my youth workers ... managed to get me a place at the college I'm at now.

I've had a job for the whole of the pandemic.

Evidence emerged from young people, too, of increased community awareness, participation – and action:

... it was more chaotic around here. No one was friendly to each other. And then the youth workers have brought us together...

Speaking to the youth workers made me think, it's not just me who lives in the estate. It's about everyone who lives in the estate.

Yeah, we're both volunteers...

- **The Impact of Youth Work across Europe**

Whilst the above study may be small it echoes the findings of a recent larger study across five European countries (Ord et al, 2018; Ord et al, 2021). This study collated 844 stories from young people from Finland, Estonia, France, Italy, and the UK (England, and Scotland). The stories also reflected the young people's responses to the question: 'What significant change has youth work produced for you?' The Young people's stories were collected across three (3-4month) cycles, from 3 youth work projects, in each of the six countries. The average number of stories collected per country was 141, with the lowest in Finland (123) and the most in Estonia (164). The stories were analysed through a process of coding, a process which established commonalities and themes amongst the stories. Importantly this was initially done separately within country research teams, who coded their own stories. Next the final codes were disaggregated from their country of origin and the whole research team compared the final codes, looking for similarities.. This produced five overarching themes which summarised the outcomes of youth work practice.

The first theme was 'sense of self'. This theme was dominated in all the six countries by the young people's stories of increased confidence, self-esteem, and increased agency. The stories illustrate how young people feel more positively about themselves, their lives, and their surroundings as a result of their experiences of youth work, for example:

Now I feel powerful and confident. I find that things are easier for me at home and school because I was able to talk with someone

(Female, age 14, England, Ord et al, 2018: 130)

The second theme was 'creating places and spaces for young people'. This overarching theme refers to how young people feel about the youth work setting - its atmosphere, and that it is fun – which are important aspects of youth work, for example the:

Relaxed and positive hustle, everybody was encouraging and happy

(Male, aged 18, Finland, Ord et al, 2018: 146)

The theme also refers to the relationships that youth workers build with young people - that:

'x' has been able to express himself and get accepted by the neighbourhood. ...Feel accepted here, not out in public or in the school.

(Male, aged 27, Italy Ord et al, 2018: 178)

The third theme was 'relating to others'. The dominant aspect of this theme was friendship, the importance of which was evident in many of the stories from all six countries. Many young people echoed the reflection from the 17-year-old boy in Estonia who said:

I have made a lot of new friends and acquaintances. (Ord et al, 2018: 168)

The fourth theme was 'experiential learning'. This theme was diverse and wide-ranging. It includes acquiring new skills and abilities, and the discovery of new activities, as well as increased opportunities. Examples include 'courage' (female, aged 22 Finland, Ord et al, 2018: 140 and 'communication' (male, aged 16, Estonia, Ord et al, 2018: 169) to 'science and sustainability' (female, aged, 20 France, Ord et al, 2018: 206).

The fifth theme was 'social inclusion'. This theme relates to young people's relationship to the social demands and expectations placed upon them. The stories relay how youth work re-connects marginalized young people who experience social exclusion. From increased employment opportunities, such as:

The centre gave me the chance to discover a new world and a possible career.

(Male, aged 18, Italy, Ord et al, 2018: 182)

It also included fundamental changes in outlook and behaviour, such as:

I would be, like, doing drugs and drinking, being a right good toe rag. But I started volunteering and I had to show the wee ones how to be a good role model.

(Female, aged 16, Scotland, Ord et al, 2021: 10)

It is clearly evident that youth work produces a wide range of personal and social benefits both to the young people themselves as well as to the broader communities within which they live. In terms of the levelling up agenda explicitly, however, perhaps the stories from Italy are particularly revealing as - perhaps in part because the youth work in Italy is with an older cohort of young people, many of whom are 20+, but also because the source of the funding was from a regeneration policy - its primary outcomes were in generating job opportunities. The most common theme within the Italian stories was 'improvement of job chances' which occurred in 57 out of the 151 stories, representing 38% of the total number of stories' (Ord et al, 2018: 182). These projects described themselves as 'enterprise labs' that enabled local unemployed young people both the chance to develop new skills, which were transferable to an employment context as well as develop existing projects into careers and job opportunities. For example, one 25 year old Italian young woman describes how she:

had a small handicraft activity, no more than a hobby. However, thanks to the enterprise lab that I'm attending in the centre, now I feel less alone and the group is helping me to try to transform my hobby into a real job.' (Ord et al, 2018: 182)

- **What young people want and need**

If any more evidence was required for the need to invest in the youth service a needs analysis of a London borough portrays a compelling picture. In 2018 its Youth Service with 14 sites engaging 5,000 young people a year commissioned an analysis on what youth provision was needed in an area located in the top 20 per cent of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (Thompson and Woodger, 2020). From a range of options, 74 per cent of the young people, parents and professionals surveyed identified ‘youth clubs’ as their top priority form of youth service. From this and other findings the researchers drew two significant ‘implications’:

- That support existed for ‘local authority funding for core work in youth clubs with some programmes or facilities potentially supplemented by grants from trusts and charities’.
- That ‘specialist support (for young people) is not necessarily separate from youth club provision as it can be offered as part of a youth club’s programme of activities’.

Conclusion

As important as it is for youth workers to articulate *what* they are aiming to achieve and are actually achieving, in itself this does not clarify *how* they might make a distinctive contribution to levelling up agendas. This emerges much more from an analysis of *how* youth workers operate - particularly the process-led ways in which they seek to engage with young people when they first meet them and then build trusting relationships with them.

With, still, few state infra-structures mandated to work with young people ‘without compulsion or regimentation’ – that is, simply on the basis of ‘We’re here; engage with us if you wish’ - youth work practitioners and their advocates are now increasingly using the term ‘open access’ to refine descriptions of their practice. Embedded within this are two defining characteristics. One is its commitment to being open to any young person who chooses to participate, whether individually or with their friendship group. Some may do this by coming to an open-door youth club, some by joining a closed group for, for example, young women or LBTQ young people. Less widely known but demonstrated increasingly during Covid lockdowns, others become involved through their contact

with the detached and outreach youth workers who appear in the public spaces where they congregate.

The second way in which youth workers seek to express the practice's openness is by taking as their starting point for any potential 'educational' inputs - the individual and shared needs, interests and concerns of the young people who they actually meet. This includes their expectation of being able to relax, meet friends safely and enjoy themselves. It is here that the process-led nature of the work is central, requiring as it does an '...improvisatory yet rehearsed educational practice with young people (In Defence of Youth Work, 2009) described previously in a 1987 HMI report as 'on the wing'.(Department for Education and Science, 1987, p 2)

Crucial though these two features are, on their own they are not sufficient to make the case for youth work as a distinctive way of working face-to-face with young people. Other 'cornerstones' have been both articulated and vividly illustrated in practice examples. (In Defence of Youth Work, 2009; 2011) which emphasise:

- As far as possible seeing *these* young people for who they are - as people first, with untapped and indeed often unrecognised personal potential – rather than being constrained by those (often highly stigmatising) labels attached to 'youth'.
- Prioritising their here-and-now experience rather than their 'transitions' to future adult-defined roles and tasks.
- Seeking to understand and engage with their important peer relationships and with their wider collective identities defined by their class, ethnicity, gender, disability and sexuality.
- Working with them to tilt some balances of power in their favour, not least by ensuring within the practice itself that they have a central role in making decisions which affect them.

None of this is to claim that any one of these ways of working offer any guarantees of 'positive impact'. What is being suggested is that, provided locally, a practice shaped by this combination of features has over many years attracted significant numbers of young people, many of whom are unlikely by choice to engage with the types of 'authority' structures through which levelling up policies will need to be implemented. Taken together this process-based youth work practice has consistently, as has been argued in this paper, provided a wide range of outcomes which could make a significant contribution to

levelling up the lives of young people and the communities within which they live. As a result of the 10 years of austerity, however, this provision has been significantly undermined and eroded. If, as this paper has argued, all young people are to be treated as equally valued members of the communities targeted by those levelling up policies, one of their essential components will need to be substantial and on-going (re)investment in youth work and in the services which use open access youth work methods.

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