The Limits of Pragmatism: Thoughts and Observations on the impact of anti-social behaviour legislation on Youth Work: A UK Perspective.

Understanding the impact of antisocial behaviour legislation on youth work is problematic, not least because the context in which we articulate 'youth work' is continually changing. A historical analysis of 'youth policy' both reveals this fact and makes further understanding possible.

Youth work has always recognised its responsibility to contribute to the "alleviation of social problems" (Harris 2005:57); indeed, this has been a rallying call for many of its most progressive recruits. But times have changed. Whilst the 'social problems' of past generations (such as poverty, oppression, injustice etc.) still demand scrutiny and action, today we are also pre-occupied with thoughts as to what actually constitutes a 'social problem'.

A recent article in my local paper comes to mind. Coupled with a picture of a group of five young men standing outside a derelict building was the caption: "Trouble: Youth on the Streets." I had to check whether this was a question, but no, this was, unequivocally, a statement, seemingly consistent with the anti-youth invective of this and other media in recent years.

I was left to ponder the implications of this for youth work. If 'Youth' was now a problem, per se, was our job to 'alleviate' [these] Youth? I had visions of, Schwarzenegger-style, going out on the streets to 'reduce' the numbers of young people, thereby lessening the 'problem' of their very existence in society. Was this simply a piece of journalistic license or symbolic of a wider shift in attitude toward young people; and a shift identifiable in practice?

Bernard Davies's (2005) review of his own 1986 text: *Threatening Youth: Towards a national youth policy* describes how the historical view of youth work as a contributor to the welfare state has, since the 1980s, been increasingly under threat. Davies tracks a series of changes in emphasis articulated by policy makers since this time. These include moves to redefine, through prescription [e.g. core curriculum, outputs, targets etc.], youth work's contribution to national economic and social interests. This rationale was, for some, based on the view that it [youth work] had, for too long, failed to offer sufficient evidence of its contribution. For others, however, it was symbolic of a growing utilitarian and instrumentalist attitude among

policy makers that youth work could be used to deliver specific outcomes, outcomes that, at best, sit uneasily alongside youth work values and processes.

Nowhere was this shift more significant than in the field of youth justice where youth work was increasingly seen (at least by policy makers) as a foil for deviance and delinquency.

Many youth work practitioners took a pragmatic view of this change in role; particularly where it was couched in terms of contributing to 'crime prevention and reduction' and offered opportunities to access much needed funding.

More recently, this 'contribution' has become enshrined in Section 17 of the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), which states:

> Without prejudice to any other obligation imposed upon it, it shall be the duty of each authority … to exercise its various functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent crime and disorder in its area.

Implicitly, Section 17 imposes a duty on state-sponsored youth workers to prevent crime and disorder. Where in the past workers articulated their role as 'adding value' to efforts to prevent crime, this and related policy signalled a shift toward the purposeful deployment of youth work as a direct *response* to crime. Most symbolically, youth work (and particularly detached and outreach work) has increasingly had to deal with demands made upon it to work in particular places, invariably those where problems of crime and antisocial behaviour have been identified.

As a result, 'response' initiatives are now commonplace, often to the detriment of projects that have traditionally focussed on the needs of a particular community. *Where* youth work is deployed – the geographical dimension – has, it can be argued, become increasingly significant in contemporary definitions of what youth work (and particularly detached youth work) is.

In addition to targeting, so-called, 'hot spots' of crime, disorder and anti-social behaviour, youth workers are now also drafted into schools and community centres to provide 'alternative education' for those disaffected or excluded from school. Likewise, 'youth work' is now a common feature of Community Safety initiatives and programmes designed to work with young offenders.

Clearly this poses several questions: does this represent a growing of the youth work and informal education sector, based on a celebration of its ability to work with challenging young people or, conceivably, a wholesale shift in praxis? Is youth work now no more than a complementary component of a wider range of interventions aimed at normalising the behaviour of young people? Has it forgotten its roots as a form of liberal and progressive education? And, potentially most worrying, is youth work now complicit in fashioning a widespread negative attitude toward young people? Ultimately, are we now part of the problem?

Let us take a moment to flesh out this problem, and consider if it exists at all. Stuart Waiton (2001) concerns himself with the narrative of 'Community Safety' and asks whether this has actually undermined young people's safety and informed adult's fear of them. Waiton suggests that changes in attitude, when combined with the emergence of an endless stream of state-sponsored initiatives, undermine the capacity and inclination of the community to deal with concerns and problems. Everyday relationships between young people and adults have been subject to interference by, and in some cases replaced by, the activities of Police Officers, Police Community Support Officers, Neighbourhood Wardens and the like. The narrative of 'rights and responsibilities' (with the almost total emphasis on the latter) that goes with these initiatives, is seen as contradictory – it actively discourages us from taking responsibility for these relationships.

This demise in 'conversation' between youth and adult (no matter how potentially fractious) actively destabilises communities and, ironically, leads to the very antithesis of that envisaged by the strategists responsible for Community Safety and Community Cohesion. Rather, these conversations should be encouraged and recognised as sites for moral learning (Tiffany, 2005). Indeed, they represent one of the few arenas where communities can exercise and commit to a "generalised responsibility for socialisation" (ibid.).

Where youth workers talk up their 'unique' ability to communicate with young people they, too, may contribute to this crisis in conversational confidence. Preferred are interventions that actively seek to bolster communicative capacity, particularly between the generations. A revisiting of the dialogical theories expounded by, amongst others, Freire (1972), Sampson (1993) and Shotter (1993) is surely needed.

We might also ask: has youth work become subservient to those that wish to 'move young people on'? Of course, the desire of young people to have 'places to go and things to do' (as evidenced in *Youth Matters* (2005) and articulated by Tony Blair at the Labour Party conference of 27th September 2005: "*Give our young people places to go so that they are off the street*") can easily be substantiated in any conversation with them. And efforts to meet these needs are to be celebrated. But where this merely confirms that the 'street is no place for young people to be' we can, again, become complicit in demonising youth. And just as youth work has been deployed in 'hot spots', so too it is deployed in the environments to which young people gravitate to after having been moved on. Theories of 'contested' and 'invisible' space become substantiated as youth workers increasingly report young people being displaced from public space to building sites, railway tracks and other, objectively more dangerous, areas in pursuit of a space where they can simply meet their mates free from adult hysteria. The sponsoring of youth work projects by rail companies (see for example *Keep Off the Tracks* 2005) to teach young people about the risks inherent in trespassing on railway lines might confirm this scenario, illustrate further the utility concept, and systematically fail to engage with the reasons *why* young people are in these spaces in the first place.

But of course, whilst many young people accept being moved on, some are reticent to give up this contest. Where confrontations might historically have involved no more than a few short, sharp, verbal interjections, today the increased politicisation of these environments and relationships can lead to an outpouring of abuse and, occasionally, even violence. And, in turn, this leads to the now regular call made to both Police officers and youth workers based on the refrain "get down here and sort these/your young people out!" [where 'your' is used in calls to youth workers]. And we do.

But, thankfully, within our range of responses, are many that display a critical and principled stance. No youth worker could fail to appreciate that some of these behaviours are evidence of a need among young people. So, reports of antisocial behaviour can be used to trigger an

investigation of these needs. Sometimes they reveal nothing, and this can be evidence of a wider fear of crime (O'Malley & Waiton, 2005). Elsewhere, our challenge is to interpret these behaviours and judge whether youth work is an appropriate response; it may well not be. In this case, it can be difficult to reject the carrot of funding that is associated with the initial request to respond. But good judgement must prevail and, if necessary, rejection must happen. This includes some cases where youth work might well be a good response, but where available resources compromise its capacity to have a real and lasting effect. Typically, short-term funding might exist to provide 'reassurance' to the community (once again we see the phenomenon of 'youth work' resources being available to meet the needs, not of young people, but of others in the community; thereby casting doubt as to whether it is youth work at all).

Importantly, reflecting on our concerns about engaging in these activities can both consolidate and reveal the value base of youth work (that, maybe, we too rarely visit). It can help us to identify and reiterate the central importance of young people's needs and the significance of enduring relationships in enabling young people to identify and act upon these needs. These needs are then potentially resolved, rather than set aside for a later date (and perhaps never). As youth workers, this must be preferable to procuring young people's involvement in diversionary activities and 'social programmes' (that are often more in tune with the behaviour modification strategies and normalising processes employed by others in the social care sector rather than those trained in the arts of learner-centred education).

There are those that say youth work has no such room for manoeuvre, that it is 'sink or swim'; 'if we don't get the money we're finished', so any utopian vision is unrealistic. But the evidence suggests otherwise. Whereas some youth work agencies have, in the spirit of pragmatism, 'signed on' for these programmes, others have fought their corner, been prepared to draw lines in the sand and stated, unequivocally, 'no, we won't do that'. Importantly (and not a little ironically), this has more often increased their standing amongst partners. In responding to the question 'why not?' youth workers have found a renewed energy to revisit and reaffirm their values and articulate more positively their aims and purposes. Workers, in full knowledge that the issues of the day for young people *are* the issues to be dealt with (for many this is the real essence of what the youth work curriculum is) have, despite criticism from some quarters and understandable trepidation, joined Crime Reductions Panels, Community Safety Partnerships and the like with a view to engaging proactively.

Advocating for young people, particularly those implicated in 'problem behaviours', in environments such as this, is, to say the least, challenging. But these are sites of important conversations, arenas in which others can gain a greater understanding of youth work's philosophical underpinnings and what it's processes entail; and be encouraged to give greater consideration to tackling root causes such as poverty and transience (Pitts, 2001).

This promotion: of what our work is about, is, more than ever before, an essential feature of effective practice. Much good work has gone unrecorded. This has to change. Evidence needs to be in the public domain. In doing so, this will likely strengthen our confidence to move beyond the romantically subversive (but politically naive) narrative of 'just say what they want to hear, take the money, and we can do what we want thereafter'. How long can we live like this? When will we finally stand up and shout loudly about what we know works rather than continually invest (and waste) energy in trying to rework strategies that are both practically and ideologically flawed?

Youth work has consistently shown a preparedness to engage with and often initiate responses to antisocial behaviour. This is not new. But it must be principled. Where there is an increasing view that problems exist and action needs to be taken, youth work will, inevitably, be identified as having a role to play in counteracting these problems. But as youth work has always known (and is particularly well evidenced in the experience of *Youthwise*, a Birmingham based project, 2005) responding in a positive manner is a complex affair. *Youthwise's* testimony reflects on the need to facilitate a dialogue between those who are in conflict with each other. And this has to focus on seeking to resolve underlying issues. Of note are the attitudes of the Police and other criminal justice agencies who emerge as equally keen not to enforce the law (due, in part, to their concerns about the amount of resources necessary to do this but, more fundamentally, a concern for its effectiveness). Peculiar alliances have grown up between agencies that no more than a generation ago would likely have found it difficult to talk to each other.

Elsewhere, there is anecdotal evidence of alliances between detached workers and Police to actually subvert the terms of [what were] Section 30 Orders (Child curfews). Local agreements about 'positive association' meant young people would not be challenged by the Police for being out beyond the 9pm deadline, provided the Police were informed of their involvement in youth work programmes. As all agreed, this was preferable to the bizarre situation of the

state employing one set of officers, namely detached youth workers, to work with young people on the street and another set of [Police] Officers to remove them from it.

Of course, this has not been the experience in all areas where the legislation has been employed. In some, youth workers have themselves fallen foul of the law and been subject to dispersal and the like. Given the almost total confusion as to the responsibilities of workers with respect to witnessing a breach of an order, it is feared a test case involving the arrest and prosecution of a worker (under Section 17) is in the offing. This said, the *Youthwise* example can also be seen as a process through which this risk can be mitigated: opening up and developing communication channels with other stakeholders creates the very real potential of promoting a wider understanding of the aims and principles of youth work with a view to negotiating a more considered (problem-solving and needs-led) response to local issues.

But whilst this localism is to be celebrated, it is clear the legislation will continue to have a negative impact on youth work more generally until significant progress is made in thinking at a national level.

Many of the key players in the sector have been, at best, timid in articulating the fundamental problem associated with the legislation. They have exhibited a dangerous level of 'pragmatism' such that claims of being guardians of youth work values ring increasingly hollow. The principled stance of local organisations and individual practitioners is seen as the basis for a concerted challenge to this uncivil, repressive, largely ineffective and, above all, antisocial legislation that, if unchecked, will continue to threaten the very essence of effective, progressive, youth work.

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