

Decision Time for the Youth Service

There is a question that has been often asked of the Youth Service. Can it survive and prosper in a changing society? In this short paper I will try to both identify some of the structural changes that have taken place around the Youth Service and make some assessment of what options it has for the future.

At times during the 20th century a left wing revolution was considered a possibility. Instead in 1979 there was a radical right wing revolution driven forward in the UK by Margaret Thatcher perpetuated by New Labour and the coalition government of Cameron and Clegg. One of the outcomes of this revolution was that many services historically delivered by the state were released to the control of either a market economy or made subject to enhanced levels of accountability and management. The Youth Service in Wales was not excluded from this although in the early stages it was often the victim of unintended consequences rather than deliberate, focused action. This was to come later.

The right wing revolution resulted in, among other things, the deregulation of global labour markets which meant that workers in Wales are competing against those in such places as China and India who are paid significantly lower wages. Until recently the short-term UK response to this imbalance was to create a consumer boom fuelled by cheap credit and by using tax credits to top up salaries of low paid workers. The long-term hypothesis in response to the deregulated market was that improved educational attainment would make the country more competitive - within a developing knowledge economy - and so steps were taken to significantly increase spending on education in general but on early years specifically and by increasing the numbers of those entering University. The latter objective has of course been affected by a recent change in policy related to University fees with its inevitable consequence on young people from economically poor families.

Another significant post-revolution political priority with the ability to affect the Youth Service has been the introduction of government strategies to combat the dangerous behaviours of young people. These include young people's involvement in

such activities as truancy, drug misuse, risky sexual behaviour, crime and anti social behaviour. In order to be seen as successful in managing these behaviours, even greater use of utilitarian methods of control have been introduced to provide results that suggest that these dangerous behaviours are being controlled by the interventions of government

It is not difficult to recognise these two government priorities as the focus of much contemporary Youth Work practice.

For the purpose of this brief overview I will focus on the educational priorities of government but I would ask you to keep in the back of your mind the overt management of a group of young people who increasingly became described as an ‘underclass’.

So what has happened to the Youth Service within this environment created by the right wing revolution? It has increased in size from about 60+ full time workers in 1984 to around 1,000 full time equivalents now. It has a significant budget in excess of £40 million, although almost 30% of it comes from non-core budget sources and its footprint (a term I never thought I would use) extends into such arenas as schools, hospitals, prisons, youth offending teams, leisure centres, homeless hostels and much more. However, it has lost much of the contact it had with its history and as a consequence its traditional way of working, which was carried out most often in open access provision into which young people entered voluntarily. As a consequence there has been only limited success by the Youth Service in Wales to maintain a young-person-first approach that can be identified by what Young (1999:2) describes as the moral philosophy of youth work – a position concerned to:

“Enable and support young people to ask and answer the central question of self – what sort of person am I? What kind of relationship do I want to have with myself and with others? What kind of society do I want to live in?”

It can be argued that this is a stance concerned to support young people to develop skills that make it possible for them to reflect on their past actions, which in turn leads

to more positive personal decisions and more appropriate contemporary actions, leading to the attainment of what a Youth Worker more than a hundred years ago described as developing a 'life worth living'. This is a concept with obvious implications for an individualised approach rather than a systems-driven approach of the sort promoted by macro politics and economics.

For a Youth Service driven by a young-people approach, the key purpose underpinning their work is the idea of '*appropriate education*' concerned to:

- Enable young people to act well and to seek excellence within the social practices in which they engage;
- Enable young people to make reasonable choices about the social practices in which they engage and the roles they take up within these social practices;
- Enable young people to develop a consistent character – showing the virtues of integrity and constancy – and have a clear sense of self in these different activities and over time (that is, have a unity to their lives); and
- Enable young people to determine for themselves the characteristics of a life worth living

The outcomes of this approach challenge embedded assumptions regarding society's traditional economic and social model, which has been built on such notions as:

- Education prepares for a job, that
- This job could last a lifetime, and that
- Life itself is largely divided into a period of education followed by a long period of work and a period of retirement

As these notions became even more redundant, consideration will need to be given to a new role for education and training. Individual life plans will need to be considered and will have to contain a combination of working and non-working time, improved management of leisure and a greater personal responsibility for the acquisition of both knowledge and skills appropriate for a changing society. Included within these descriptions would be attributes such as decision making, problem solving, and communication skills which are of personal advantage in both working and non-working situations.

Delivering this appropriate education has however become a near impossible task for schools alone, affected as they are by a changing, complex society. This was recognised by Williams (2002), who argued that the involvement of young people in appropriate education is being diminished because the institutions that have historically helped many of them shape their lives are not always available. As a result, too many young people are excluded from family continuity, work, and access to conventional religious practice or involvement in shared public activity.

Awareness of this unstable environment allows for the identification of a number of characteristics from which a more relevant understanding of Youth Service identity can arise. First, the work of the Youth Service should be part of a wider community response to the identified needs of young people, which are most often linked to educational, emotional, welfare and social needs. Second, there are opportunities for the Youth Service to operate alongside formal education, employment, local community activities, and the activities of the family. Third, the Youth Service needs to be part of the response to societies moral obligation to young people carried out in partnership with school, employment, local community, and family endeavours.

What then are the contemporary challenges for the Youth Service in Wales? What can it present to government as an alternative method of practice? First, it needs to provide young people with real life situations in which choices have to be made on the basis of ethical considerations. These considerations would be linked to the development of humanity and justice through commitment, encouragement, self-esteem and enthusiasm gained from involvement with real life encounters and experiences. It should become an organisation underpinned by the importance of young people developing interests and being passionate about them. The Youth Service needs to return to using such activities as, for example, sport and music, which are obvious passionate interests of young people. From such interests other initiatives can be developed within the broad themes of Social Projects and Education. These could be concerned for example with counteracting violence and vandalism, diminishing the gap between youth and adult society, creating a safe environment on public transport, working in schools to improve the social climate and managing occasions where large groups of young people meet at festivals, public beaches and

recreational areas. Strategies could also be developed to guide young people into adulthood through a range of activities such as residential activities, study visits and charity work. The role of the trained and qualified adult in these programmes would be critical in that it clearly recognises that young people need to mix with adults in order to participate, contribute and to learn. An aim for the Youth Service would be to deliver more creative young-people-centred activities rather than a functional management driven approach concerned with providing a wide range of evidence related to management and control.

There are a number of possible options for the Youth Service at this time:

1. Continue to travel its current path – a passive observer of its own decline;
2. Develop a strategy with all stakeholders identifying a way forward. By doing this the preferred path of the Youth Service can be identified and promoted;
3. Take the right wing revolution approach and move away from a dependency on government funding and develop a partnership between public funding provided for a specific purpose, young people who want to purchase a specific activity and sponsors who want to promote a particular brand or commodity. This could see the introduction of what could be called a Youth Service Trust – a further step into the market economy.

John Rose

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References

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