

The conflicted practitioner

By Nicholas Hudd 06/11/17

Having been employed in the youth work sector in Wales for the past fifteen years I must confess to being more professionally conflicted than in any previous period throughout my career. Where is the profession I have worked in; advocated for and witnessed first-hand the benefits of, heading in the future? On the one hand initiatives such as: the registration of youth workers with the Education Workforce Council, the Welsh Government Quality Mark process, the publication of Professor Donaldson's *Successful Futures* Report and the emergence of The Well-being of Future Generations Act, provide hope and optimism. On the other hand, the shadow of austerity looms large; decisions about youth work seem to be shaped more by short term economic factors rather than long term social development. The long established principles which govern the practice and are prescribed by The National Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2014–2018 which in turn was heavily influenced by the 'Extending Entitlement' (2002) policy and practice are arguably being eroded. Having previously been guilty of proportioning sole blame to the political classes I have, of late, re-evaluated my position. It could be argued that this is one of the consequences of being employed in a sector that prides itself on reflective practice.

For those who have persevered thus far and are now of the opinion that I have exonerated the political establishment all together, I would like to clarify at this early stage, I have not. I am however going to focus on other agents who have played a role, whether consciously or not, in adding to the confusion which in turn has led to a shadowy void being created; a space in which the narrow economic arguments have been allowed to grow, restricting the sun light offered by focusing on the core principles referred to previously, and placing emphasis on what youth work costs, rather than what it saves. Those involved in the sector have become all too aware of the fiscal debate around youth work; the emphasis placed on identifying avenues of funding; the prominence now placed on grant compliance rather than adhering to the ideologies prescribed in the Youth Service Strategy document. Perhaps, we as a sector, have not been strong enough in presenting our own pecuniary reasoning.

Currently approximately ten percent of my working week is spent supporting young people with Universal Credit related issues. On October 18th 2017, Theresa May announced at Prime Minister's Questions that the Government were abolishing the charges imposed to call the Universal Credit Helpline number; a somewhat abstract issue for many of the demographic I currently engage who lack the confidence and communication skills to use such a resource, regardless of cost. I would argue that the work I and colleagues do in regard to this issue alone saves the Department of Work and Pensioners (DWP) huge amounts in time and money. I oversee a time banking scheme which has seen young people 'donate' hundreds of hours of volunteering to their community, again a direct net monetary value gain for the area. With ninety to hundred young people attending the youth club I facilitate on a nightly basis, perhaps we need to be making submissions to the police that we are not only steering young

people away from crime during these times, but also ensuring they are not becoming victims of it themselves, saving that particular service considerable amount of times and resources. Keith Towler (Chair of CWVYS and former Children's Commissioner for Wales), argued in an article published by the Education Workforce Council in April 2017 that youth work actually saves lives. Whilst some commentators may want to debate the merits of such a powerful, emotive statement, I and practitioners like me have many anecdotal recollections of supporting young people who have been suicidal. Whilst these interventions focus more on the reactive response of our work, and do little to shed light on the proactive element through the help, support and guidance we offer by building long term relationships with young people, they highlight both the complexity and potential impact of the work we do. I often ponder the cost I and colleagues saved governmental organisations and the public service purse when we supported a nineteen year old young man who, after attending the youth centre, disclosed he was suicidal. Having escorted him to his local GP, who referred him immediately to the hospital, I and a colleague drove him the 7 miles to attend A&E. After sitting with him for six hours, the hospital found him a 'secure bed' but unfortunately it was forty miles away, and they did not have an ambulance to escort him. Faced with two options, taking him home to return the next day, or driving him ourselves the forty miles, we chose the latter due to the behaviour he was displaying. How much would this have cost other services had we not acted?

The examples I have just referred to perhaps hint at the 'agents' I mentioned earlier, who I suggest must share some of the responsibility of the circumstances youth work now finds itself currently operating in throughout Wales; I, us, we the practitioners. My use of the term 'anecdotal' in regard to recalling interventions with young people is part of the problem and arguably a dichotomy practitioners face; yet another conflicting element I have to reconcile. How do I accurately record and measure what I am doing in a way that allows me to maintain a balance between the time spent delivering the work and the systems used to account for that time, and the impact my practice is having on young people? For too long youth workers have relied on anecdotes to describe the work being done and the influence it has. We compete for parity with other professions such as teaching and social work yet struggle to use robust data to evidence what we do. The registration of youth workers with the EWC only goes so far in addressing the parity issue, though our practice must change too. Tania De St Croix (2016) talks at length about the 'challenge of audit' in youth work; in essence that which cannot be proved is deemed not real and has not happened. This is not a new problem, many commentators have pointed to such issues for some time contending that the *Youth Work Curriculum Statement for Wales* was first introduced in 1992 as a political solution to this very problem, with accreditations being seen as performance indicators. Returning to such arguments is, I feel, not productive. Yes history has lessons to teach us, but only current practice can effect change. I would argue the situation has moved on considerably from relying solely on accreditations to measure the impact of our work. Some practitioners perceive conflict where no conflict exists in terms of this issue. Distance travelled and self-efficacy are just some tools which are now being employed in an attempt to measure the impact of our work, the data produced by these should be seen to complement anecdotal

evidence. Practitioners need to look beyond a paradigm of either/or, and take charge of their own destiny where they understand and utilise all and any evidence to illustrate what we do. That way a truer reflection of the services being offered can be presented, whereby what is being reflected on goes beyond answering the prescribed questions often set by specific agendas. Returning to Keith Towler's point of youth work saving lives, it seems reasonable to suggest some commentators may challenge such a statement when there appears to be a lack of empirical data supporting it.

I have hinted here at a wider concern, which is part of the reasoning and motivation for writing this article; youth workers need to move from a position of responding to political and economic agendas to a situation where they can work with young people to set the agenda going forward, based on the needs of those we aim to serve. For some, this will appear to be a radical utopian concept, for others it will simply be the realisation of the 'empowerment' referred to in *Youth Work Wales: Principles and Purposes (2014)*. For this to happen though, practitioners need to take ownership of the mistakes we have made, so we can ask the political classes to do the same. However hard it is to admit, we as practitioners are some of those who cast the shadow on the void created. As a practitioner working in the youth work sector in Wales for fifteen years I have complained about the lack of parity with other professions; the absence of a collective voice from the sector, referred to a dearth of published work pertaining specifically to Wales, yet done little to address these issues myself. This paper is a small step to readdressing this imbalance, along with a plea for practitioners to start utilising data to inform their work and shine a light on the profession by writing more about their experiences in it. The conflict that sometimes exists between youth workers and the political establishment have distracted us from conveying a message of what we do to a wider audience, including the community and other professions. It has meant we practitioners have, at times, lost sight of the fact that we are custodians of a profession that in reality is, and should always be, owned by young people.

References

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