ACCREDITATION:
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Accreditation of young people's achievements has long been a feature of youth
work. However, recent initiatives seem to be pushing us more and more in this
direction. Accreditation is an important part of what we do but we need to
understand the reasons for doing it. It is not enough simply to accredit *everything*
we do with young people, accreditation should have some value, primarily for the
young people achieving recognition but also for the people working with them
towards such achievements. This article explores the advantages and
disadvantages of accreditation for young people in Wales and examines some of
the possible outcomes of the policies currently being put in place.

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"Recent policy initiatives in England have sought to 'transform' youth work and
bring it much more tightly in line with government objectives, those working with
13-19 year olds will have to ensure that 60% of young people reach some sort of
accredited outcome," (Smith, M. K., 1999, 2002)[i] (this figure has since been
reduced to 30%). It is beginning to look suspiciously as though Welsh policy may
be moving in a similar direction. Following a recent Estyn inspection of the
Youth Service in Wrexham there has been a strong drive towards accrediting
young people's work, 'celebrating their achievements', in youth clubs, projects
and street work. This paper will examine the reasons behind this initiative and
how, if at all, accreditation fits in with the values and theories of informal
education.

Historically, youth work emerged firmly from the informal education tradition.
Its derivation has been associated, by some historians, with the development in the
late eighteenth century of Sunday schools and 'ragged schools', aimed at young
people who were excluded from formal education opportunities. The Reverend
Arthur Sweatman, a key figure in the development of youth institutes, argued that

among young people's "peculiar wants [were] evening recreation, companionship, an entertaining but healthy literature, useful instruction and a strong guiding influence…socially and morally," (cited in Smith, 1999, 2002)[ii]. Uniformed youth groups began to emerge in the early 1880s and by the first decade of the twentieth century Baden-Powell had begun to develop the Scouting movement, "exploring schemes and educational forms" to influence "his own vision" (Smith, 1999, 2002)[iii]. Following the Second World War society began to recognise young people as an entity of their own and, with the publication of the *Albemarle Report* in 1960, a dedicated youth service began to emerge.

Given that informal education and lifelong learning has *always* been a key focus of youth work the sudden urge to validate and certify it is somewhat perplexing. In the past there has been an expectation that the value of youth work be determined in terms of participation, how many young people were reached, how many of them were at risk of social exclusion, etc. The emphasis now seems to be shifting towards evaluating youth work in terms of what value has been added to the lives of young people through their experience with youth work. Formal educators might argue that if lifelong learning is an important part of our work it should be measurable, youth services should be able to meet educational targets in the same way that formal education has to. To be judged by the criteria of quality rather than quantity of work is a positive step, which may lead to other agencies beginning to take youth services seriously and successes can be used to raise the profile of youth work. This is already so for formal education and government policy and targets are certainly moving informal education in the same direction. The *Extending Entitlement* document makes it clear that the emphasis of services for young people should be around "enthusing young people with the value of learning" and encouraging them into "education, training or employment"[iv]. The Welsh policy document, *The Learning Country*, displays many similarities to *Transforming Youth Work* in England, setting targets to raise the aspirations and expectations of young people, their parents, their communities and their learning settings to the point that by 2015 "95% of young people are ready for high skill employment or qualified for higher education"[v]. (Learning Country briefing paper). The accreditation of young people's work, therefore, provides government agencies with a tool for measuring the performance of youth services.

HM inspectors for Wales, ESTYN, have a section which, in examining standards of achievement, looks at whether young people are "acquiring knowledge, understanding, awareness and practical skills", and whether young people are "achieving desired outcomes, including accreditation" (Estyn Guidelines)[vi]. Clearly then accreditation can be used as an instrument for qualifying and controlling what youth work does. Accountability is, of course, vital; young people have an entitlement to a particular standard of service and youth services should be held responsible if not providing it. As a method of accountability, using a business model that is target driven and outcome focused provides a means of justifying, or not, youth services and can be used as way of securing all-important funding sources;

> The more clearly we specify the ends, the better we will be able to
>
> choose the means of achieving them. [vii](DFES, 2002)

However, accreditation may not be the best way of achieving this outcome. Although accreditation is often synonymous with achievement, it is not the same thing! It is not about learning; it is about the process of assessment, the act of measuring success. The Collins Dictionary defines accreditation as "describing attributes"; giving "official recognition to" or "certifying as meeting required standards" [viii]. Assessment, therefore, requires someone, of perceived superior knowledge, to judge and make decisions about the credibility of an individual's learning and then endorse it with a certificate.

The concept of accreditation shifts the priority away from the *process* of learning and begins to make it outcome driven. Traditional education is closely affiliated to the needs of the labour market; its purpose is to prepare young people either for employment or for further education; a process of "engineering people"[ix] (Illich, 19??). The trend towards formalising educational methods in youth work, on one level, seems to be a strategy which further supports the priorities of formal education. Are youth services in the business of training young people to be obedient, employable citizens, equipping them with the skills needed to uphold a capitalist society and maintain the status quo? The National Youth Agency statement of youth work principles would say not; it states that youth work should "encourage young people to be critical in their responses to their own experience

and to the world around them"[x]. The nature of youth work is that it is unpredictable and driven by young people and their questions and issues, youth workers have a responsibility to encourage young people to question and analyse the values on which society is built. These are outcomes that are not tangible and cannot be easily measured, validated or accredited;

> Youth work is, fundamentally, social groupwork. It is a form of informal education concerned with the cultivation of associational life…It evolves and takes direction from the interactions of those involved… As such it's central benefits cannot be easily identified in the short run. They are wrapped up with the quality of communal and democratic life… social capital.[xi] (Smith, 1999)

Focusing on accreditation, therefore, detracts from the unpredictability and spontaneity of youth work; it is the process of learning and the learning relationships which are important. It "substantially increase[s] the pressure to formalise the activities of workers…and to take them away from the sorts of open-ended conversations, activities and relationships that defined the work in the twentieth century"[xii] (Smith, 2002).

There is an argument amongst youth workers, which states that the emphasis on outcomes and targets creates a danger of over-accrediting, thus devaluing genuine achievement; the more accreditation we offer the less valid it becomes. One of the phrases bandied about is "we'll be giving out certificates for teeth cleaning next!" Thus far, there is no recognised route by which teeth cleaning specifically can be accredited, but it does raise certain issues. If accreditation is not available for seemingly menial activities, why isn't it? Who makes the decisions about what does, and does not, constitute a valid learning experience? Does accreditation in informal education therefore *support* the elitist framework normally associated with traditional education? In order to retain usefulness in society, accreditation routes need to be developed in partnership with business and formal education institutions, which leads to a top-down approach to learning, where the agenda is set not by young people but by the needs of government and business;

> …our advanced technological society is rapidly making objects of most
> of us and is subtly programming us into conformity… [xiii]

Far from celebrating young people's achievements, then, we are allowing them to be manipulated into perceiving as achievement that which society values.

In order for accreditation to have any currency in society it needs to be recognised by employers and educators alike. Do the certificates we provide, for example, OCN and ASDAN Awards and Youth Achievement Awards or Children's and Youth University, have any real value in the eyes of employers? Duke of Edinburgh Awards are now so well established that they have become widely recognised and young people participate in them knowing that their ROA or CV will be enhanced by having them. However, newer awards, such as Youth Achievement Awards, are relatively unknown outside the sphere of youth services, so an employer has no frame of reference against which to judge its worth. If such awards have no intrinsic value it could be argued that they are merely 'edutainment', a process used to keep young people occupied in order that they don't have the time or inclination to challenge or disrupt society; education as entertainment.

Education when it works can be a liberating experience, unfortunately the formal education system does not suit everybody's learning style. Often a negative experience of school can profoundly affect a young person's attitude to learning, to society and to life. Offering young people alternative opportunities to succeed can perhaps break this cycle of failure. Modern day formal education is structured around a belief that there are particular skills and knowledge which enrich the life of the learner; exactly which skills and what knowledge are decided by external agencies and the extent to which it is useful to the individual is debatable. By offering official recognition for abilities other than those identified in school curriculum, young people can begin to analyse and challenge the education system, thus accreditation can be used as a tool for "affirm[ing] the uniqueness of each person, while acknowledging and confronting the structural inequalities and institutionalised oppressions, which advantage some groups of people at the expense of others, and which tip the balance of power in ways which act to dominate rather than liberate."[xiv] (Young, 1999).

Young's vision of liberatory education is reliant upon a dialogical model of learning. To challenge the status quo, questioning the validity of traditional learning models and power structures, Freire would argue, young people must engage in dialogical learning relationships, for which it is necessary to know, understand and speak the language, which is "prescribed… by the dominant members of their society"[xv]. Without language it is not possible to conceptualise the world or the world's problems; young people are trapped in a 'culture of silence'. Embracing the concept of accreditation therefore can be used as an empowering experience. Traditionally, education is exclusionary, it is structured and directed towards a particular type of person (mainly white, middle-class men), many young people find that they cannot succeed in the formal schooling environment. Youth work has an opportunity to give validation and recognition to a different set of skills and values and an alternative method of learning; by recognising difference and making qualifications accessible to those who often disengage and become excluded from school. If the role of youth work is indeed to "enthuse young people with the value of learning", then presenting young people with alternative models of learning and alternative routes to qualification and employment may well be the way to achieve this.

Accreditation as a concept has some value; it is a worthwhile practice to celebrate young people's achievements and successes providing the interests of young people are central to the process. The Albemarle Report (1960) declared that the role of the youth service is to provide an opportunity for "commitment, counsel and self-determination and allows for recreation, the development of skills and interests and preparation for adult life through opportunities for association, training and challenge."[xvi] (cited in Extending Entitlement) and the focus of youth work needs to remain with this commitment.

It is important for some young people in some circumstances to have their efforts recognised, however it is also important for young people to engage in dialogical processes, in a safe environment, which allow them to explore ideas, examine thoughts and feelings and develop critical and analytical skills. Government policy needs to reflect these less tangible facets of youth work as well as the measurable targets it currently supports. Accreditation outcomes are not, and

should not, be the main focus of work with young people. Similarly youth services and workers need to try not to "lose sight of the essential qualities of youth work"[xvii] (Smith, 2002), and not to allow themselves to be under pressure to seek out those activities for which an obvious accreditation outcome exists.

In theory youth workers should be looking at activities in which young people are already involved and finding ways to offer accreditation for them. If young people are already participating in an activity, already engaged in the learning process then they might as well get some credit for it. However, the awards achieved should be a bonus to, not the reason for, the experience. The Youth Service needs to strike a balance between the informal education relationships it develops with young people and the desire to accredit everything a young person does. It is important that the youth work ethos is maintained and that accreditation must be just one of the options available to young people. Given that accreditation is becoming, for statutory services at least, a mandatory expectation, youth workers need to ensure that it is appropriate and that it is in the interests of young people. If the informal, convivial and associative nature of youth work is to be retained it is important that young people continue to be at the centre of our practice.

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