

Curriculum or collaboration?

Like most other youth workers, I have been preoccupied in recent months with the potential implications of the proposed national curriculum. Apart from all the 'obvious' concerns (about, for example, retaining a person-centred approach capable of *responding* to the needs of young people), I have been wondering whether any standard approach to working with young people (i.e. one which can be measured and assessed) is possible in youth work. Unlike other 'educational' settings, young people's involvement with the Youth Service is voluntary. This is, indeed, the unique feature of youth work. Its consequence, however, is that we can never predict at what point individual young people will become involved with the youth service, how regularly they will be involved, or how long they will stay. We therefore do not have a fixed or predictable 'audience' to work with - to develop 'core competencies' and specific skills. Of course, at times we will work closely with some young people over a significant period of time; it is to be hoped that our interventions and relationships with them will have some effect. Other young people, though, have only fleeting contact with us. There are also always some young people with whom, regrettably perhaps, we have a sustained relationship but little impact.

I am not arguing that we should drift along without *any* 'markers' to permit external scrutiny of our work. Indeed, I have long been an advocate for much greater clarity of vision and purpose in the work we do with young people. But I have become increasingly concerned that it is now the Youth Service which is being harnessed to a groundswell of politically-inspired priorities ('curriculum', 'standards', 'assessment', 'performance review') which, in other spheres such as schooling and youth training is already being subjected to challenge on the grounds of both practical implementation and the validity of the thinking that lies behind them. Critics of, for example, testing and the national curriculum in schools are queuing up to make their voices heard. If we go along with the political agenda for the youth work curriculum, we in the youth service may be collaborating with what many see as a repressive and divisive system of education and training which has yet to be properly evaluated and is at serious risk of being discredited.

Julia Fry's letter in *Young People Now 12* stimulated this article. She discovered that four participants (in their 30s) had all attended the same youth club; they told her that the club had been great because "they didn't do anything very much, except interact with their peers and the workers in a nurturing environment which allowed for spontaneous exploration of matters of concern to them and made them feel part of a bona fide group which welcomed them every week". I have always felt that good youth work practice is about providing *space* for young people away from the pressures of family, school, scheme or work, while simultaneously workers are skilled in sensitively responding to issues and anxieties which may arise at both individual and collective levels. Julia Fry concludes that "the Government's current obsession with immediate and easily quantifiable 'outcomes' could suffocate the style of work which helped produce these remarkable people".

I am not sure whether a 'curriculum' of the kind I think is envisaged by the government is in fact workable in the context of youth work. I do recognise, however, that it is necessary for the youth service to be much more clear about what it does and to develop mechanisms to record its practice so that it may be subjected to more consistent forms of external scrutiny.

My thinking is shifting to an approach which would involve *profiling* the young people with whom we work. I have often been horrified how little many youth workers know about the young people in their clubs. Surely, if the bottom line of youth work is about developing positive and trusting relationships with young people, workers should be able to *record* what they know about those individuals and the *processes* of working with them. It should be possible to record young people's involvement (eg the sessions they attend a youth club) and after, say, ten sessions, to document some factual information about them: gender, race, age, family background and circumstance (siblings, one parent, etc.), schooling or work status, and so on. This could be done on a simple pro forma. Two other pro formas could then be used to record the breadth, frequency and outcome of subsequent youth work practice. One would be concerned with 'intervention' - that, for example, 'Steve' participated in a residential, was involved in an informal discussion on drug misuse, sought some guidance on his job aspirations, or needed some support in relation to a court appearance. The other would provide some commentary or interpretation of the 'effects' of such

interventions - that, for example, Steve developed in self-confidence, became less aggressive, had a clearer vision of his future, started to make a contribution to the running of the club.

The youth worker would record when and why various 'interventions' took place and provide illustrations to back up assertions about the 'effects' of such practice.

This approach would hold true to the 'personal development' rationale for youth work. It would, of course, require workers to spend more time on 'paperwork', which would not prove popular. But it would allow external inspectors, managers, or performance reviewers to examine both the quantity and quality of youth work that was being done. It would be up to them to judge whether or not the level and intensity of intervention, and the numbers of young people worked with, justified the resources being allocated. Clearly, workers working with 100 young people might only be having a significant 'effect' on 20 of them; their work would have to be contrasted with that of workers involved with, say, only 25 young people. Furthermore, external scrutiny would have to pass judgment on the interpretive records of the workers; this might require some in-depth discussion with randomly selected young people (just as external examiners deal with a random sample of examination papers to ensure consistency across different educational institutions). It would also ensure that account was taken of the types of young people with whom 'youth work' was being done: 'interventions' and 'effects' are going to be very different if one is working with a 14-year old young man from a stable background that if one is working with a homeless 17-year old young woman with a history of sexual abuse.

I have no idea whether such an approach could secure any credibility with those who are currently setting the political agenda for the youth work curriculum, but before we plough blindly along in the wake of these expressions of political priority (probably through our fear of biting the dust if we do not), it is important that we consider whether other options are available. I have set out one possible alternative. Others will have different views. Whatever emerges, however, has to be in keeping with our professional integrity and our understanding of the interests of young people. Otherwise, I fear, we will find ourselves propelled down the same

demoralising path that has been carved out for our professional colleagues in teaching, social work (probation), youth training and further education.

Howard Williamson

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