

Introduction

It is a useful time, as we almost certainly reach the beginning of the end of another political dynasty, to reflect on the past and try to identify what changes lie ahead for the Youth Service.

The term Youth Service needs a short explanation because it has become a disingenuous description, particularly when used by some politicians and civil servants who all too often misrepresent it by using such meaningless terms as youth services; youth support services and services for young people. The Youth Service is an organisation with a history stretching back to 1844 with a legislative base first contained in the 1944 Education Act. It brings more than 20,000 adults into contact with 200,000 young people who meet in 792 local authority youth clubs and projects and an uncounted number of voluntary clubs and projects involving, for example, Scouts, Guides, Young Farmers, Urdd Gobaith Cymru, and the YMCA.

The Youth Service has a particular approach to its work including:

1. A voluntary relationship with the young people it comes into contact with;
2. being age specific (11-25);
3. having a particular education approach;
4. being driven by a young-people-first approach;
5. having open access.

If any of these characteristics are not in place it can not and should not be identified as the Youth Service.

It might be useful at this point to state that in being an advocate for the Youth Service I am not a critic of other forms of work with young people. What I am concerned about is the proper location of the Youth Service both in the lives of young people and in the minds of policy makers.

So, on with the process of reflection, which should have one rule. There should be no nostalgic view of a bygone Youth Service utopia when resources were plentiful, when it played an active part in policy development, when young people were respectful and well behaved, and everyone involved had a shared understanding of what being a Youth Worker was all about. None of this has ever been a reality to an organisation that has struggled for recognition and sufficient resources for almost all of its existence. We can however allow some time to reflect on those days, in the not too distant past, when, for example, there was no epidemic of accreditation, when Youth Workers spent more time with young people than they did in meetings, and spontaneous activities did not take 6 weeks to organise.

In this process of reflection two questions are being considered:

1. What is the current state of the Youth Service?
2. What actions are required to make the Youth Service more effective in providing a service that meets the needs of young people and the requirements of government? The second part of this question is important because the overwhelming budget provider to the Youth Service is the Welsh Assembly Government through the Revenue Support Grant to local authorities.

What is the Current state of the Youth Service?

Philosophically

I would suggest that the Youth Service is in a schizoid state in that it is driven by a set of conflicting or contradictory ideas and attitudes. For example, some believe young people should be dealt with as a problem; some believe that the role of the

Youth Service is to persuade, direct young people to return to formal education with its formal examination approach; others believe that the Youth Service is a ‘social care’ organisation requiring a paternalistic approach. I don’t believe this schizoid state is natural to the Youth Service but one created after the publication of Extending Entitlement in 2001 by those who believed the development of Young People’s Partnerships (a short lived political invention) as an organisation in its own right was more important than its potential constituent parts which included the Youth Service. The replacement agenda with a Children and Young People’s Partnerships approach, provides, it can be argued, another opportunity for the Youth Service to be located in a one size fits all approach to work with young people. Many of the strategic decisions taken by those with a responsibility for policy implementation since 2000 can be seen to have confused, miss-directed and diminished the role of the Youth Service. They also convinced many of its managers and practitioners that to adopt the new integrated services for young people approach was to live in the **real world** where the abandonment of the fundamental principles and values of the Youth Service for additional cash or greater security was an appropriate decision. This position fails, I believe, to recognise that political priorities and perspectives generally change more often than they have done since 1979. Within a more usual cycle of political power the ability of political processes to interfere in the micro management of organisations such as the Youth Service is diminished. It should be remembered by those living in what they consider to be the **real world** that once a position of principle has been abandoned the unique ‘young people first’ approach of the Youth Service could be lost permanently. We should never forget that at some stage another political era will affect our work.

However, in this reflection we should not forget the a small number of individuals – many of whom were students of Bert Jones – who maintain a belief in a form of non-formal learning built on the work of educators such as Illich, Brookfield, Jarvis, and Freire. Their approach challenges the overall effectiveness of formal education in isolation, including its methods of measuring success, by offering a broader

perspective of the values of non-formal learning as a complementary method to formal learning systems. Formal learning systems, these non-formal educators claim, offer certain types of arrangements which may not suit the needs of all learners, implying that the formal context offers some, but not all, an opportunity for learning. To overcome this, they suggest systems should be developed to:

“provide the learner with new links to the world instead of continuing to funnel all educational programmes through the teacher.”

(Illich 1971:73)

This philosophy has been promoted as the most appropriate approach for the Youth Service, which is described as a community-based organisation involved in a non-formal style of teaching and learning during the leisure time of young people. The Youth Service achieves this aim through the use of participative and empowering methods, with the fundamental principle of its work with individuals and groups arising from mutual agreement between practitioners and young people. This basis of negotiation and contract serves as the foundation for a particular style of learning driven by a belief that:

“knowledge is assumed to be actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment; and second, learning is an interactive process of interpretation, integration and transformation of one’s experiential world.”

(Pratt 1993:17)

The Youth Service has provided such opportunities for young people through, for example, Sport, International Exchanges, Community Aid Projects, Dance, Theatre, Craft, Association, Climbing, Canoeing, and Music.

It can be argued that the long term future of the Youth Service as a unique and valuable organisation to young people and our society is dependent on this small embattled group remaining firm in their belief and maintaining the principles and values of their work with young people.

Financial Position

I would suggest that, despite many of my colleagues moving into the real world, the Youth Service has not had the level of resource to develop and deliver the world class Youth Service that the Welsh Assembly Government promised, and, which the young people of Wales deserve. There have been two bouts of enthusiasm for supporting the work of the Youth Service. The first and the most serious being Albemarle in the 1960's. The second and less serious during the Extending Entitlement debate when the Youth Service was asked to 'dream the dream' by the then Youth Policy team of the Assembly and estimate the cost of delivering a model Youth Service capable of meeting the role defined for it. A decision was arrived at based on an analysis of four local authority Youth Services in Wales. The results from these authorities was extrapolated to a national total by means of an indicative distribution formula used for the Children and Youth Partnership fund which concluded that:

“the costs of a complete and comprehensive Youth Service which would cover both universal services to young people and targeted youth work would require in the region of £100 million per year”

At that time the planned expenditure for the maintained Youth Service was £14.2 million, which left a shortfall of some £85.8 million, which suggested that a significant political commitment would have to be made by the new National Assembly for Wales to enable it reach the funding levels identified by the modelling exercise.

The group having the dream were made aware that this significant level of financial support would not be made available and more realistic recommendations for additional resources would have to be made. These were calculated by the group as £5.238 million for 2001-02, £10.510 million for 2002-03 and £14.385 million for

2003-04. Despite this significant reduction from the original estimates, the proposals did not meet with the approval of the National Assembly for Wales, which made further cuts to its proposals and a final decision was taken to reduce the allocation of new money even further to £2 million for 2001-02, £3.7 million for 2002-03 and £4.75 million for 2003-04, which is the level at which it has been capped. The implications of this decision can be identified by the results of the 2006-07 audit of the Youth Service. The key points identified an overall increase in the numbers of full-time workers, and a significant increase in the numbers of qualified workers. It also identified an increase of income of 24% between 2003-04 and 2006-07 but of concern was the reduction in core budget which had fallen to 63% from 67%. The average spend of the local authorities was identified at £37 per head of young people [11-25] with the lowest local authority spending just over £7 per head. The audit also identified that of the 792 buildings used by the Youth Service only 8% were considered to be 'fully fit for purpose'.

What actions are required to make the Youth Service more effective in providing a service that meets the needs of young people and the requirements of government?

Firstly, the Youth Service needs to promote its work as a non-formal education service with the outcomes of its work being:

1. Active Participation
2. Skills Development
3. Enhanced Emotional Competence.

It should, in this process deliver the sort of education described by Tony Blair which he described as *“Education is about more than exams we are right to insist that education is about something more. It is about opening minds not just to knowledge but to insight, beauty, inspiration”*. In doing this we should reject the current obsession with formal accreditation of almost every activity young people take part in

through the Youth Service. The Youth Service should stand together to overcome the bullying associated with this obsession. We need to be part of a broadening of the education of young people, many of whom are contained within a narrow band driven by a formal assessment process which many youth workers have adopted. We need to free them from this restriction. In doing so we will enable young people to be more effective contributors to their families, the communities within which they live and to society in general.

Secondly, the Youth Service should restructure the way it is managed, the way it trains and supports its workers and the way it delivers programmes of activities for young people. This restructuring within the agreed Regional structure would be concerned to:

1. maximise the time workers spent in direct contact with young people
2. prioritise its work with the 14-19 age group
3. produce and retain workers who are aware of the purpose of the Youth Service the way it delivers youth work programmes and how these programmes can be valued in a way consistent with a non-formal education approach.

The Youth Service in Wales has a budget of approximately £40 million. This significant resource needs to be re-distributed in a different and more effective way. Perhaps this could be achieved with 4 Regional Youth Service managers with a more effective career path leading to this position. Perhaps, it is time to increase the numbers of full-time workers by reducing the numbers of part-time workers. Estyn has consistently said that the most effective work with young people is carried out by the qualified full-time worker. Perhaps, it is time to devolve the responsibility for youth support worker training and in-service training to the Further Education sector rather than doing it in-house at varying levels of quality and cost.

Thirdly, the Youth Service needs to develop links with the Political process as a means of ensuring it has the opportunity to influence policy rather than responding to it generally far too late.

Thank you for your attention. I look forward to some challenging questions.

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