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Critically analyse how effectively youth and community work is able to maintain its discrete way of working within a policy framework driven by a partnership approach?

To be able to answer this question, we need to understand the policy framework within which youth and community work now operates but also explore what we mean by ‘discrete way of working’. Through this exploration, we will be able to determine whether or not youth and community work has a discrete way of working, whether these methods are currently under threat and how, if at all, we are able to maintain this way of working.

The current policy framework both in England and Wales seems to be driven by a partnership approach. Youth work has increasingly been recognised for its role in both the social inclusion agenda and also for its ability to support young people into becoming ‘active and effective citizens’ (Tyler, 2009, p. 236). Whilst these are potential outcomes of youth work, they are not necessarily the purpose and function of it. Rather, they can be seen as derived from the ‘discourse’ which informs political decision making relating to youth policy (Spence, 2004). Therefore, policy developments have tended to focus on youth work’s ability to achieve certain outcomes with young people, rather than value the process itself, which understandably and immediately creates tensions and ‘conflicting expectations’ (Tyler, p.240).

Davies (2005) describes the direction of England’s youth policy direction, highlighted in *Transforming Youth Work, Developing Youth Work for Young People* (Department for Education and Employment, 2001), as being target driven and changing provision for young people into a partnership based service delivery which is asking for youth workers to become ‘a Jack-of-all-trades practitioner’ (Davies, 2005, p.5 and 6). Spence (2004) comments that the policy direction set out in *Transforming Youth Work* not only asks for youth workers to work within a partnership framework but also places a focus on supporting young people through their transition into adulthood. This is a shift, she suggests, from the traditional view youth work holds of ‘youth’ which is of ‘being’ as well as ‘becoming’ and doesn’t

allow for the holistic approach to young people and their lives, focussing on their positives, rather than their ‘deficits’ (Spence, 2004, p. 262).

The policy context in Wales also relies on a partnership approach in delivering services to young people. However, youth policy in Wales has also been underpinned by the government’s adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989). This has affected policy development in a different way to that of England, with an emphasis on young people’s rights being the foundation for all work with young people in Wales. Extending Entitlement (NAfW, 2000, WAG, 2002) was generally welcomed by the Youth Service sector as it identified the need for a multi-disciplinary approach to supporting young people and also identified the role of the Youth Service in Wales within this context. This included being the providers of information and support to young people, contributing to the government’s agenda of employment, health and learning and finally to encourage young people’s participation with regards to decision-making (Rose, no date). The directions and guidance for the Extending Entitlement Strategy (WAG, 2002) placed a requirement on all 22 local authorities to establish Young People’s Partnerships, through which key organisations would co-ordinate all provision for young people. This requirement was later replaced by the need for the establishment of Children and Young People’s Partnerships (CYPP) and an overarching plan for all work with children and young people aged 0 to 25 years old. Extending Entitlement also placed a requirement on authorities to provide a Youth Service.

From this point, youth policy development in Wales has been underpinned by a partnership approach. The requirements for CYPPs to be established, along with the development of the 14 – 19 networks within a policy framework guided by documents such as Children and Young People: Rights to Action (WAG, 2004), 14 – 19 Learning Pathways (WAG, 2006) and The Learning Country: Vision into Action (WAG, 2006) has meant that youth and community work has been expected to work within a partnership context, as part of the wider youth support services that young people access.

More recently, this partnership approach has been revisited and is being tested within an even wider context through the Families First Programme (WG, 2011). This

programme has associated funding which has replaced the Cymorth funding stream that was previously administered by the CYPPs. However, the focus of this funding stream and strategy is somewhat different from previous developments as it focusses on key principles which are: family focussed, bespoke, integrated, pro-active, intensive and local. Whilst some Youth Service provision has received elements of this funding and has found, in some authorities, a place in the Families First plan; it is questionable where exactly youth work fits within this context and whether it really allows youth work to actually take place. Targets and performance measures have been set, outcomes need to be realised and this all takes place within a time limited framework. Within this context, there are some real concerns about how young people can have a real voice in this process and how youth workers can continue to work in partnership, unless their way of working is recognised, valued and maintained. Equally important is the debate which exists for partners to view youth workers as professionals with 'equal status' (Spence, 2004, p. 267).

Processes which have been established for Families First also throw into question the role of the youth worker and also where the needs specific to young people are addressed and met. Through Families First, we are seeing the introduction of the JAFF i.e. Joint Assessment Family Framework and also the TAF i.e. Team Around the Family, which is an extension of the CAF i.e. Common Assessment Framework. It is intended that relevant professionals work together as part of a multi-disciplinary approach to assess the needs of families as they are referred into the team for support. On its own, this approach is not necessarily a poor idea, as it is accepted in the youth work world that often the needs of the family have a huge impact on a young person. However, this approach is problematic when the needs of a young person are grouped with that of their family's.

Furthermore, this process of assessment usually needs to be co-ordinated by an individual. In some situations, youth workers are being asked to co-ordinate the assessment of the family, rather than focussing purely on the needs of the young person. However, more alarmingly, we are seeing the emergence and evolution of what is known as the 'key worker' or sometime called the 'generic worker'. This worker is seemingly low paid but expected to be youth worker, family worker, social work assistant and co-ordinator of the family assessment without any of the training

required, except government funded ‘key worker’, ‘motivational interviewing’ and ‘working with families and children’ training. These workers are expected to understand what is locally available to the family and to be able to sign post appropriately. Unfortunately, the experience of many Youth Services is that huge expectations have been placed on these key workers, and that the Families First Teams, whatever their structure, feel they have something to prove. The result is a cheaper, watered down version of a youth worker and demonstrates that there is still a huge lack of understanding about the level of training required to work with young people appropriately. There are other key issues such as confidentiality which need to be addressed and this issue is explored in more detail later.

So what is ‘discrete’ about the youth and community approach and is it at risk within a partnership approach? Youth work has always historically been difficult to define. The concept of developing a relationship with young people over time has always been at the core of any explanation but clarifying that further has often proved difficult. This is partly due to the complex nature of the youth worker and young person relationship, the ‘personal, subjective and the professional...inextricably interwoven’ (Spence, 2004, p.264). This complexity can be difficult to convey and not always recognised or valued. The Albemarle Report (Ministry of Education 1960) highlighted the three areas of association, training and challenge as the main aims of the Youth Service (Smith and Doyle, 2002). This put an importance on young people coming together. However, within today’s policy context, this aspect of youth work is sometimes missed and has become the ‘hidden curriculum of interpersonal interaction’ (Davies, 2005, p. 4). This can create tensions within a partnership approach.

In Wales, the Youth Work Curriculum Statement for Wales (Standing Conference, 2007) outlines the values, principles and purpose of the Youth Service, which include the notion that youth work is underpinned by a set of values which include the voluntary principle of young people’s involvement, universal not targeted, young people led and part of process, with an importance placed on social interaction as well as individual. The National Youth Service Strategy (WAG, 2007) aligns itself closely with these values and outcomes for young people are set out under three broad themes: active participation; wider skills development; and enhanced emotional

competence. These values outline and define ‘youth work’s distinctiveness’ (Davies, 2005, p. 4) and so it would seem that as they are captured in policy, in Wales at least, it could be argued that these principles are not so discrete and actually quite clear to partners.

Perhaps what is not so clear when reflecting on the value base of youth and community work is the underlying principle of sharing power with young people. Davies (2005) writes that what distinguishes youth work’s value-based approach, in comparison to that of social work for example, is ‘how it seeks to express those values’ (Davies, 2005, p. 4). The youth work relationship between a youth worker and a young person sees young people retaining ‘a degree of power’ and it is this element that is ‘intrinsic to the practise’ (Davies, 2005, p.8). This is supported by the view that the very nature of a relationship between a youth worker and a young person automatically raises questions about power and that these relationships are developed within an understood and agreed context of justice and equality (Spence, 2004). Furthermore, youth work is not being true within the relationship unless it constantly strives to ‘tip the balance in the young person’s favour’ (Davies, 2005, p.7).

Both Spence (2004) and Davies (2005) highlight ‘time’ as another re-occurring theme that is not often captured fully in any definition of youth work practice and which can have a huge impact on the ability to develop appropriate relationships with young people. They recognise that ‘diverse timescales’ are needed for ‘effective practice’ (Davies, 2005, p.4). Time as a theme has also been identified and singled out as a fundamental aspect to successful youth work practice in research into the effectiveness of detached and outreach work (JRF, 2004). The report shows that sufficient time is needed to build effective relationships with young people to be able to make a difference. Again, with many partnership approaches having set targets and outcomes, allowing enough time for youth work to take place can prove difficult and make relationships difficult, both with young people and partners.

For professionals and partners, the underlying principles of youth and community work which include voluntary engagement, sharing of power and a timeframe and pace that suits the young person, can be difficult to understand. It is this that makes

youth work's way of working discrete, as it is not always clear and obvious to young people themselves and other partners what underpins the work. However, these elements of youth work are essential to good youth work practice; and within a policy framework that is underpinned by partnership working, which includes agreed targets and outcomes, this discrete way of working is at risk.

There are, however, other issues which relate to youth work's discrete way of working that are also potentially at risk. Youth work clearly operates within the boundaries of confidentiality. However, these boundaries are agreed at an organisational level and can change dependent on the organisation. For most, confidentiality within a safeguarding context means that young people should be informed, where possible, that if they disclose that they or someone they know is being harmed in any way, this information will need to be passed onto social services and/or the police. Informing young people prior to the disclosure gives young people a choice about whether they are ready yet, or not, to share what is happening to them. There are constant debates between practitioners about this area but it is expected that workers follow their organisational procedures.

Within the youth work world, however, there is another side to confidentiality. Young people do not need permission to access universal youth provision, unless it involves activities that either need consent, such as trips or residentials, or information sessions such as sexual health. Within a partnership context, this can cause problems. Often partners need information about young people kept on a database. Furthermore, partners often want to be informed about young people being worked with, their 'issues' and who their family members might be. This is particularly pertinent in the new Family First initiative, where the 'Community Hub' approach being developed in some authorities requires information about any work with young people funded by the programme to be shared with the hub. This could mean potentially that young people accessing services anonymously will be shared with partners and possibly with key workers for their families. Davies (2009) identifies in the report on 'Squaring the Circle' that confidentiality, a key principle of youth work, may be at risk within a partnership approach to young people's services.

Within a moral debate, considering that young people access Youth Services on voluntary basis, the fact that their information may be required to share has huge implications. Yes, the discussions take place about acquiring young people's consent and this is built into the data collection, along with organisational information sharing protocols. But does a young person, at 13 years of age, ever really understand what it means to give consent to their information being shared? Do youth workers really know what will happen with that information, once it is shared? Equally, and perhaps more concerning, is the idea that this information may be shared with untrained, 'generic' or 'key workers', who might understand their own organisation's confidentiality procedure but may not have any concept of the inappropriateness of sharing this young person's information with the young people's parents, grandparents, carers, social worker, teacher or any other professional linked to that young person. Confidentiality in this context is often and regularly misunderstood by key partners. It is paramount in this situation that the youth work practitioner is explicit with all partners about their commitment to confidentiality with the young person. If this is expected to be compromised in any way, this must be firstly explained to the young person, to give them a real choice about their involvement. For if this does not happen, then it could constitute as a 'betrayal of trust' (Banks, 2003, p.153).

However, the question asks how effectively can youth work's discrete way of working be maintained? The answer to this question is hugely dependent on a number of factors. If the funding of the Youth Service is independent of the partners involved, a degree of independence can be maintained, and the discrete way of working can be upheld. Positive relationships with partners can also have a huge influence over the degree to which ways of working are accepted. Tyler (2009) focuses on individuals as one way of managing the tensions between partners' expectations against youth work's expectations of its youth workers. She refers to the need for youth workers and managers to become skilled as 'principled pragmatists' (Tyler, 2009, p.234). In this context, this means someone who is able to be realistic and practical in their approach but will feel comfortable with their decisions and actions, as they will not compromise their values (Tyler, 2009). This also suggests that to manage these tensions, youth workers should manage their situation by becoming 'reflective, analytical and critical thinkers' which will ensure that 'youth

work values remain central to their organisation's practice by influencing it upwards' (Tyler, 2009, p.244). This approach, she argues, will help youth workers balance more effectively the growing tensions of daily work within a partnership context of targets and outcomes. This strategy and approach, whilst valid and admirable, is hugely reliant on the willingness, integrity and ability of the individual.

Other suggestions are that youth work needs to be much clearer about its discrete way of working (Banks, 2003). If existing policy documents such as the Youth Work Curriculum for Wales (Standing Conference, 2007) need to be strengthened, then they should be strengthened. Furthermore, if positive relationships are developed with partners who gain through this relationship a better understanding of youth work, outcomes and targets can be negotiated or shared, to allow time for youth work to take place. Youth work acknowledges and recognises the need to demonstrate impact but accreditation is only one aspect of measuring progress. It is the impact of the more 'discrete' elements of the work that need to be measured.

There are examples where there is positive and good practice across Wales, where partnerships are true partnerships, and partners are respected as equals. Unfortunately, the discussions across various youth work forums in Wales suggest that this situation is not a consistent picture across Wales. Only when time is not so pressured, when targets and outcomes are changeable, when young people are viewed in a positive light rather than a problem, when it is accepted that young people have the right to choose not to be involved, will some of the tensions be managed and youth work's discrete way of working be fully maintained, rather than feel like a constant battle.

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