

## ***Taking Sides: Dilemmas and Possibilities for 'Radical' Youth Work***

*Taking Sides* explores the potential of engendering radical youth work theory, looking at what might be considered as foundation literature and possible future developments. As such, it necessarily adopts more of an academic approach than other chapters of this book.

The chapter has been adapted from an original paper written by Tania de St Croix. Moving from an effort to stimulate theory building by way of an emphasis on practice critique and the honing of professional judgement, Tania shifts the perspective of the book, tightening the focus on the trajectory of literature that specifically uses the practice realm as a focal point.

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**I would like to thank her for her important contribution to this book.**

As youth work is increasingly subsumed within the capitalist project, professionals in the field are finding it difficult to claim political neutrality without demonstrating a professional death wish. This chapter examines whether there is a 'radical' form of youth work which takes sides against the growing incursion of capitalist influence on practice, consequent authoritarian attitudes extended to practitioners and young people alike and ecological destruction.

A definition of radical youth work is proposed which emphasises resistance and a political perspective as well as methodological values. Using this definition, I will review radical influences on youth work debates and practice. The concept of radical youth work challenges those of us involved in the field to choose to analyse the situation efficiently and effectively; if we fail to do this, youth work will become more firmly entrenched as a form of social control. We have for a long time been walking in our sleep, hoping for the best as a profession. This has resulted in the undermining of our professional credibility.

### **In search of niches and forgotten corners**

My motivation for writing this chapter is to make some sense of the contradictions and possibilities of trying to live out ecological and anarchist beliefs while attempting to be a 'good' youth worker. A brief personal history: I left school full

of naïve political vigour, fresh from fighting the school mock election as a Green Party candidate and interested in neither university nor career. I worked as a volunteer with a play scheme and a youth project and went to live on a local anti-road action camp. A year later, the road protest fizzled out and I got my first paid play-work job. I began to experience something of a dual identity as public services worker and political activist. Challenges included negotiating the clash between professional and activist cultures, explaining my criminal convictions to employers, and managing my time and energy between two demanding and unpredictable activities. In recent years I have prioritised my youth worker identity, while trying to maintain at least some political integrity.

This has not always been successful. My condescending vision of raising the consciousness of young people was obstructed by the everyday realities of youth work, especially because I had no coherent theory to support my practice. I will attempt to address the latter at least and hope this exercise will be helpful to others. When I began reading I was struck by two things. First, despite many youth workers identifying themselves as anti-authoritarian, surprisingly little is written on the subject of youth work resisting the status quo, especially when compared with the more extensive literature on radical schooling (see Wright, 1989 and Hicks, 2004 for useful overviews on radical education). I realised I could not investigate radical youth work before asking whether such a concept even exists. Second, I discovered a widely held view that youth work's survival is threatened (e.g. Davies, 2006; Jeffs, 2002; Jeffs and Smith, 2006; Tiffany, 2007). This perceived threat to youth work is part of the backdrop to the motivation for what follows.

In their critique of government youth policy, Jeffs and Smith (2006: 36) argue:

*For youth work to survive with any integrity it will be necessary to exploit niches and forgotten corners; and to hide from, or at least stay out of sight of, key State surveillance systems.*

I am won over by this hint at youth work practice which is prepared to duck state surveillance to preserve its integrity. The search for 'niches and forgotten corners' suggested the questions I have attempted to tackle. However the problem with 'hiding' is, as Botteheim (1979) argues, that it is a limited tactic (as evidenced by the case of Anne Frank). But can I justify approaching youth work from a political perspective? Is a notion of 'radical youth work' meaningful, and if so, how can it be defined? Is there a history of radical youth work? How do youth workers from radical perspectives experience the dilemmas and contradictions of working 'in and against the state' (London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group 1980)? What are the possibilities, if any, for future radical youth work theory and practice?

Youth work lacks an extensive literature (Gilchrist et al., 2003). There is little recent writing from an explicitly anti-capitalist (but see Taylor, 1987, 2000, 2007) or ecological perspectives on youth work. By and large the literature tends towards liberal reformism (e.g. Francique, 2007) not really assessing the role of the state in

any significant depth. Much of this material apparently takes the view that the provision of youth work is made for mostly benign reasons. This can only be named as naive and I hope my arguments can strengthen youth work theory, connecting it more firmly to wider social and political considerations. I also hope that it stimulates debate and adds meaning to my own youth work practice. As Karl Marx (1845) argued, 'The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'. I hope, at least, to change my own actions in the world by developing a more coherent and contextual theoretical understanding. Ideally, I hope what I have to say will spark thoughts, agreements and disagreements amongst others interested in whether there is or can be such a phenomenon that might be understood as radical youth work.

My approach is influenced by values developed partly through my experience of reading, talking and thinking about 'radical youth work', which has challenged my values. It therefore seemed natural to me to at points use narrative forms to 'tell my tale'. The possibilities of educational research as narrative are explored by writers such as Clough (2002) and Richardson (1990, 1996). In this chapter, my interest in storytelling is simply its potential to bring coherence to seemingly chaotic processes. In this I have been inspired by Wells (1986: xii) who argues 'The available evidence is given meaning by being embedded in a story in which it makes sense'. I need to show my 'working out' as if in a GCSE maths paper. Wells (1986: xiii) again makes a valuable argument:

*The evidence is never so complete or so unambiguous as to rule out alternative interpretations. The important criteria in judging the worth of a story are: does it fit the facts as I have observed them and does it provide a helpful basis for future action?*

The approach of Clough and Nutbrown (2002: 10) both attracts and dismays me. I support their argument that researchers have their own perspective, and that:

*... research which did not express a more or less distinct perspective on the world would not be research at all; it would have the status of a telephone directory where data are listed without analysis.*

Clough and Nutbrown (2002: 38) seem undecided whether methodology is instrumental or value-based. Something of their worldview is suggested by their argument that:

*In the end, the characteristic task of a methodology is to persuade the reader of the **unavoidably** triangular connection between these research questions, **these** methods used to operationalise them and **these** data so generated (emphasis in original).*

I oppose this linear view of inquiry, and am suspicious of social research methodologies which claim to be scientific and factual. As Altrichter (1993: 43)

argues, a connection exists between educational research and professionalism which 'cannot be conceived as instrumental problem-solving, because the 'problem' is usually not unambiguously given'. Here I present my methods in the knowledge that I could have chosen different methodological options and that my findings are far from being inevitable because, 'the future is problematic and not already decided, fatalistically' (Freire, 1998: 26). This does not mean I believe 'anything goes', and I aim to be coherent and 'build on (my) intentions and submit them to method and rigorous analysis' (Freire, 1998: 48).

Although limited by youth work's low profile in print generally, I have grown aware of many key debates in the field, but needing to find a focus, Paulo Freire's theories on reading became inspirational:

*We should not submit to the text or be submissive in front of the text. The thing is to fight with the text, even though loving it.*

Freire and Shor, 1987: 11

My political motivations are highly relevant to the subject matter of this piece and I agree with Fairclough (2001: 4) that:

*... it is important not only to acknowledge these influences rather than affecting a spurious neutrality about social issues, but also to be open with one's readers about where one stands.*

The affiliations with which I initially approached this research are presented above, and I attempt to be clear about my own beliefs, assumptions and arguments throughout the chapter.

But as indicated above, my primary influence is Freire (1988, 1998) the Marxist-influenced Brazilian activist and educator who argues that students should be actively engaged in learning which arises from their own experience. I did not approach what follows as an empty vessel in search of pure knowledge, but as a committed youth worker with twelve years experience, aiming to develop 'critical capacity, curiosity and rigour' (Freire, 1998: 33). Throughout, I aim to make theoretical and human connections and to develop strategies to deal with the contradictions between my identities as an anarchist and a youth worker. Beyond the individual level I hope to spark criticism, thoughtfulness and debate around the possibilities and problems of radical youth work.

In structure the chapter moves broadly from the general to the specific. The first section sets the context, arguing that youth work is affected by ideology and can never be a neutral endeavour. In the second section I develop a theory and definition of radical youth work. Section three looks for radical influences on ideological struggle in the history of modern youth work, while the fourth section focuses on attempts at radical practice. In this context, section five reflects on some of my own experiences of dilemmas in radical youth work. In the conclusion I summarise the key dilemmas and possibilities of radical youth work.

youth work specifically it is therefore important to identify what is fundamental and distinctive about youth work generally. Davies (2005) and Jeffs and Smith (2003) have written in more depth on this subject, but for the purposes of this paper I argue that youth work's distinctiveness can be summarised in three features:

1. A social education purpose.
2. Informal methods.
3. The principle of voluntary participation (young people choosing whether to take part).

These features are repeatedly emphasised across different ideologies and types of youth work (e.g. DfES, 2002; Jeffs, 2002; Jeffs and Smith, 2006; Nicholls, 2005; Robertson, 2001; Spence et al., 2003; Tiffany, 2007; Williams, 1988; Wylie, 2001; Young, 1999).

Youth work is influenced by ideology in the language used to describe it, the features which define it and what takes place under its name. Where consensus exists, it results from ideological struggle by workers, young people and others. Youth work's social educational purpose was established during its professionalisation in the late 1930s (Smith, 2001) and has been defended since then (Jeffs and Smith, 1994, 2006). The informal approach survives so far, despite attacks by government-imposed curricula, inspection and bureaucracy (Davies, 1986; Harris, 2005; Jeffs, 1997; Stanton, 2004; Tiffany, 2007). The principle of voluntary participation remains despite pressure to target and monitor supposedly 'problematic' individuals (Bradford, 1997; Jeffs and Smith, 1994; Jeffs and Smith, 2006). These key features of youth work have endured for nearly 70 years despite attempts by the political right to undermine them.

## **Towards a theory of 'radical' youth work**

What is 'radical youth work'? Some time ago my radical youth worker identity was a matter of instinct and I had no clear answer to this question, so I found myself searching for a theory of radical youth work, but while the concept existed in youth work literature (e.g. Bradford, 1997; Butters and Newall, 1978; Leigh and Smart, 1985) it was rarely theorised in detail. I needed a definition or framework of radical youth work but one based on my own experience and informed by theory. Although youth work lacks extensive written theory, 'people routinely use theories without making them explicit or labelling them as such' (Bond, 2004: 13). Youth work theory tends to be grounded in practical experience, often containing inadequately considered assumptions (Flowers, 1998). To develop a theory of radical youth work I initially considered some of my own assumptions.

My choice of the word 'radical' requires justification because it is rooted in my (sub-) cultural context. I identify as a radical because of my history and continuing identification with environmental and anti-capitalist direct action movements. I take my political identity into my workplace, both inevitably and intentionally. I use my

skills, and try to provide spaces, to enable young people to practice co-operative community; I aim to be a political educator, but a questioning influence rather than a propagandist; and I believe in young people taking authority for themselves, using it to care for others and the planet as well as themselves. Specifically I call myself an ecological anarchist but, while I make no secret of this, there are probably few ecological anarchist youth workers. In this chapter therefore I am interested in a broader category of political conviction which I sum up with the word 'radical'.

In common usage the word 'radical' suggests extremity on any political spectrum, for example, 'Thatcher's radical welfare reforms', 'radical Islamists' and 'radical animal rights activists'. The less political use implies newness, as in 'The BBC today unveiled radical plans to rebuild its website' (*Guardian*, 2006), a usage which paradoxically results from radical's older meaning as 'returning to the roots'. However, the political sub-cultural meaning of 'radical' is also valid. Building a political movement includes creating or changing language, and the word radical is used by left-wing and anarchist movements. These encompass people who label themselves as anarchists, socialists, communists, feminists, anti-racists, environmentalists, those who identify with various labels, and those who avoid political labels. As many differences exist within each group as between them, so the catch-all 'radical' is usefully vague. It is used by professional groups including teachers, social workers, community workers and midwives, but is harder to find in youth work theory.

Tony Jeffs wrote an article entitled, 'Whatever happened to radical youth work?' (2002: 4). Jeffs presents youth work history as dominated by two ideological traditions, conservative and radical, with the latter in decline. His concept of radical youth work is most clearly articulated in this passage:

*There has always been a radical tradition within youth work, of workers committed to not merely working with young people, but working with young people in order to try and create a better society. Something that is about radical root and branch reform.*

But if radical youth work is about creating a better society, what would this society look like? This question is barely addressed. While agreeing with Jeffs' analysis that there are different ideological traditions in youth work, I would argue that to reduce them to two traditions is overly simplistic and leads to a broad definition which encompasses socialist, liberal and all non-conservative youth work. A narrower definition would usefully distinguish radical youth work from reformist liberalism.

Canadian academic Hans Skott-Myhre (2005, 2006) conceptualises radical youth work from a specifically Marxist perspective. In a recent article with Gretzinger (undated) he defines radical youth work as:

*... an alternative form of work done with youth that centres on the premise of intergenerational collaboration that might be described as located on the edge.*

This collaboration theory is reminiscent of Hart (1997) whose 'ladder of participation' model promotes an ideal of young people and adults sharing decisions (see *The type of place we were looking for: Radical youth work in practice* below). This idea is exemplified by Youth Force, a community action group in the Bronx, New York City (Checkoway et al., 2003). But the trouble with collaboration as an end in itself is that it assumes progressive political values on the part of the children and adults involved. Would collaboration between adult British National Party (BNP) activists and young people, leading to direct action and challenges to the status quo, count as radical youth work in this model?

Skott-Myhre and Gretzinger clearly argue from a left wing perspective, but their definition of radical youth work is based on methods rather than values.

The tendency for educators on the left to fudge their values led Freire (1998: 93) to argue:

*I cannot be a teacher and be in favour of everyone and everything. I cannot be in favour merely of people, humanity, vague phrases far from the concrete nature of human practice.*

Youth workers are often guilty of this vagueness. This might partly be because of a strong belief in 'being non-judgmental'. At best, this prevents stereotyping and negative labelling, but at worst can stifle debate. Struggles against sexism and racism, however, have successfully changed youth work discourse and practice. I do not claim that youth work is always anti-sexist and anti-racist, but the overt sexist or racist comments and actions which were once common in youth clubs are becoming rarer. While these forms of youth work have at times been contradictory or ineffective, they are at least refreshingly clear about their political values. They demonstrate that we do make judgements. Indeed, not to make professional judgements makes us firstly apolitical, secondly more or less redundant, as in effect we would have given up the responsibilities consistent with the youth worker role and have become little more than a sounding board and/or a relatively unresponsive onlooker. Thirdly, if we fail to make professional judgements this quite logically means we are potentially unprofessional as it would compromise our child protection, health and safety functions as well as prevent us from taking action on bullying and all the various forms of bigotry that our job descriptions and obligations to policy and legislation dictate that we challenge, actively engage with, counter and prevent.

My working definition, then, is based on values (which I admit could be accused of being 'vague phrases'; it's difficult to avoid this in a short definition). It aims to include various left wing or anarchist political positions but not be so broad as to encompass 'everything except the right'. My definition also includes fun and points out the inevitability and necessity of political struggle. It is inevitably imperfect, but is at least a basis for this chapter and for wider debate:

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### **A definition of radical youth work practice**

Radical youth workers work informally with young people and take them seriously. Their daily work is informed by political and moral values: opposition to capitalism and authoritarianism, belief in equality and respect for the environment. They question 'common sense' and reflect critically on their work. They are aware that practising their beliefs will involve debate and struggle, but try to have fun too!

## **Controllers or liberators? Radical influences on youth work struggles**

This section focuses on struggles in youth work history, and whether radicals have had influence on them. For the sake of brevity I will consider the radical influence on three key debates:

1. Is the purpose of youth work informal education or social control?
2. Does youth work worsen or tackle oppression and structural inequality?
3. How should youth work respond to 'new managerialism'?

### ***Education or control?***

The concept of informal education has become entwined with modern youth work discourse, but youth work's roots are in leisure provision, care and welfare. Nineteenth-century youth organisations such as the Boys Brigade, the Girls Friendly Society, Scouts and Guides used leisure activities to inculcate middle-class values (Davies, 1986) within a broadly compassionate environment wherein the well-being of young people was noted and sometimes attended to. Youth work jargon gives clues to these origins; the phrase 'youth provision' implies something provided by someone (middle-class adults) for someone else (working class young people).

Early youth work was a response to fears of working class 'disorder', and aimed to prepare young people for war and the workplace. After the introduction of the state-sponsored Youth Service in 1939 and its strengthening in 1960, youth workers have increasingly, particularly over the last quarter of a century, named at least part of their role as involving informal education (Davies, 1986). Over the last decade some practitioners have defined themselves almost wholly as playing this role and practically abandoned the title of youth worker. This conceptual change from the involvement in leisure time to educational delivery was pragmatic as well as ideological but it also appealed to professional ego, providing what some workers saw as a higher status role; educators attract higher pay and status than leisure workers and police officers (Leigh and Smart, 1985). At the same time in the early 1980s it was beneficial for youth work trainers and academics to identify themselves (their departments or colleges) as educational (rather than say welfare oriented) in order to take advantage of the then higher rates of pay in Higher



Education (relative to Further Education at that time). Hence the academic writers on youth work were quick to take up the educational signpost. Thus most writing about the informal educator role is perhaps best read circumspectly.

In a review of training, Butters and Newell (1978) argued that most youth work was part of the 'Social Education Repertoire' and as such had made a 'critical break' with character-building aims. They even called for the further radicalisation of youth work (a call which is less common in recent state-funded research reports!). In any case, Butters and Newell gave the impression that socially controlling forms of youth work had all but ended. Several years later, Taylor (1987: 133) argued that this had been over stated:

*... contrary to what liberal ideologies might wish to be true, character building, the indoctrination of obedience to the capitalist imperative, is alive and flourishing.*

Capitalism was well entrenched in the youth work of the 1970s and 1980s, not only through 'character building' but also through its involvement in work-related skill courses and job creation schemes (Davies, 1979).

Many youth club members today remain blissfully unaware that they are meant to be getting an education, assuming that workers merely 'wield the keys' and distribute the table tennis balls' (Davies, 1977: 4) – this of course begs the question if what is delivered is in fact 'education' or more a form of covert indoctrination – can one be said to 'authentically' taking part in 'education' without knowing it?

Meanwhile, the state has attempted to formalise youth work's educational role by introducing a curriculum, unpopular with young people and youth workers (e.g. Stanton, 2004). This 'official blessing' of youth work, as being primarily or even wholly educational, is problematic for those seeking to formulate, or deliver, radical youth work, if they take on the now state-sanctioned educational role. Can a truly radical form of youth work implicate itself with a purpose approved and energised by the state? Radical youth work surely requires practitioners to define their own role and purpose that would surely be much more eclectic than a purely educational function. How can the youth worker/educator, as defined by state policy and the broadly liberal/reformist literature, be anything other than reactionary?

Alliance and compliance with the state pulls the profession towards a controlling role that is supplementary to control of the school. For example, recent government policy (DfES, 2002) requires youth workers to measure their members' achievements through recorded and accredited outcomes. Tiffany's (2007) research found that even detached youth work<sup>1</sup> is becoming structured, thereby excluding the most vulnerable young people it sets out to reach. As Jeffs (1997: 164) argues:

<sup>1</sup> Detached youth work is youth work which takes place flexibly on streets, in cafes, in shopping centres or wherever young people are (Tiffany 2007).

*The provision of quantifiable output measures for youth work is impossible; for who can measure the worth of a conversation, the value of an experience or the depth of an insight, on a scale of one to ten?*

Specifically radical influences on these debates are hard to detect, possibly because the fairly united (if muted) opposition by youth workers to social control policy has blurred boundaries between liberals and the left.

### ***Equalising or oppressive?***

Radical influences are more easily seen in anti-oppressive youth work. This includes youth work that is aimed at challenging homophobia, classism and disablism (albeit limited in some cases), but I will focus on anti-racist and feminist youth work. Williams (1988: 1) explores these tensions from a black neo-Marxist perspective, arguing that the state and white youth workers perceive black workers as a means of controlling black young people. This is of course in line with colonial forms of control that deployed 'trustee natives' to control their compatriots; how else could a few thousand British colonial troops and officials control the teeming millions of the Indian sub-continent in the 19th and early 20th century? Williams argues that success in these terms means:

*... we alienate ourselves from our communities, because we have to repress to a greater extent. It is one of the principle ways that we can show we are not a threat to the white system.*

This is not confined to black workers/and young people. Youth work has made a habit of employing 'locals' of every creed and hue to work with their communities.

John's (1981) Youth and Race research project concluded that youth work was institutionally racist, working from a pathological view of black young people, and trying to control or exclude them. Radical black activists have been at the forefront of developing youth work practice that explicitly aims to change the system rather than support the status quo (John, 1981; Williams, 1998). Inevitably, the state has attempted to limit this effect, using 'divide and rule tactics' (that can be identified as a feature of the European colonial period – see Fanon, 1965 and 1967) to make groups compete for funding rather than work together.

Early 20th-century 'girls work' varied from the conservative, emphasising motherhood and marriage, to the feminist, promoting knowledge of social issues and lobbying for more rights for working women (Turnbull, 2001). By the early 1960s, most 'girls clubs' had become mixed and dominated by boys, while single gender boys clubs continued to operate. This led to feminist critiques which accused youth work of inherent sexism (NOW, 1983). In the 1980s, women feminists started groups specifically for young women, facilitated discussions on sexism and challenged unequal access to resources (e.g. Pons, 1981) while some male workers explored feminist approaches to boys work (e.g. Taylor, 1981). Openly feminist youth work has declined, partly because of negative perceptions

of feminism (Spence, 2003) and partly because resources continue to favour supposedly criminal young men. The limited resources for young women are often for teenage pregnancy reduction, as young women tend to be perceived as sexually rather than criminally deviant. However, many of the formally 'boys only' clubs have, since the late 1970s become mixed gender facilities partly thanks to the feminist male youth workers who pioneered this change, but also the decreasing will of a growingly 'co-educational' era to resource this type of work together with the demise of its funding streams from the ostensibly shrinking bastions of sexism alongside their diminishing overt influence of society. However, these kind of cankers are far from extinct and have become largely camouflaged within institutional structures (this is evident from statistics on relative pay, the comparative paucity of women in authority positions, even in the upper echelons of the youth work whose workforce is predominately female etc.).

### ***Responses to new managerialism***

'New managerialism' has been a growing influence on public services during the Thatcher, Major and Blair years. Youth work has been affected later than most, somewhat protected by its traditional role as the 'Cinderella service' where under funding is accompanied by relative autonomy from state and market (Jefferis, 1997) – although in practice this separation has become much less convincing over the last dozen or so years. But managerialism increasingly affects youth work, introduced through apparently generous funding with strings attached. 'Diversionary activities' (under various policy guises) have enabled youth projects to organise attractive and expensive activities which were previously unaffordable. In return they are asked to target certain named individuals (or 'target groups') and keep detailed personal records on them which are often shared with other agencies. Opposition to this monitoring and surveillance has been limited; as generic youth work faces cuts, many youth workers have had to choose between colluding with the new managerialism or facing the closure of their projects.

Meanwhile, marketisation of youth work is heralded in the familiar guise of choice:

*Our first challenge is to put young people themselves in control of the things to do and places to go in their area. We don't want government agencies second guessing them. So we propose to put buying power directly in the hands of young people themselves . . .*

DFES, 2005: 5

This means 'Youth Opportunity Cards' to be topped up by parents and local government to access facilities, including youth projects. These cards may increase choice for middle class young people who can afford expensive activities, but offer nothing to the most vulnerable: 'This subsidy would be withheld from young people engaging in unacceptable and anti-social behaviours and the card sus-

pended or withdrawn' (op cit.: 5). This signals a change 'from a membership to a consumerist model of youth work' (Jeffs and Smith, 2006: 25) that in fairness has always been around in one guise or another but never as so ubiquitously as today. Again, there are few signs of active resistance except perhaps from trade unionists:

*The Youth Service could be bought and sold by young people swinging their new Opportunity Card in the direction of terrified councillors. If the young people misbehave of course their rights to cheap McDonalds and political influence in the Council House will be taken away. Whatever!*

Nicholls, 2005: 9

### Summary

I have looked briefly at some important struggles in youth work history but missed out many others, including young people's struggles against youth work (Humphries, 1981; John, 1981; Ball and Ball 1973). While there has not been a coherent radical tendency, there is evidence of scattered radical involvement in struggles over the direction and role of youth work, particularly in anti-oppressive youth work. One common thread is that youth work has been most successfully controlled through resource allocation. It is unclear whether radical youth work has diminished, but there is a worrying lack of concerted opposition to current repressive youth work policy and the growing move towards replacing the same with forms of informal education, a practice unlike 'generic youth work' whose methodology and agenda makes room for focused state aims and so measurement of the same/standardised quality assurance.

Many youth workers are willingly joining the managerial recuperation of youth work, and those that do not are treated with suspicion (Jeffs and Smith, 2006). Apple's (2001: 30) reflections on similar struggles in schooling strike a chord:

*Active professionals are free to follow their entrepreneurial urges – as long as they 'do the right thing' . . . Foucault's panopticon is everywhere.*

### The type of place we were looking for': Radical youth work in practice

Practical examples of radical youth work are limited in number but they are qualitatively important. To give an analogy, anti-climate change action happens at various levels including through governments, the media and pressure groups. Radical direct action groups are qualitatively different from other campaigners in both their methods and values, despite often receiving less media attention. By blocking the Drax power station and calling for it to be permanently closed, protesters acted themselves instead of asking for government action, drawing attention to the major changes they argue are needed to halt climate change (Dymedia, 2006). Similarly, radical practice has been a minority aspect of youth

work but its methods and values are distinct. I will consider three areas where radicals have had an impact: political education, autonomous spaces and environmental youth work.

### ***Political education***

Magnuson (2005: 164) argues that political education is more often reformist than radical:

*Instead of politics, we have created niches where we allow youth to participate, and we have created new languages, for example, civic engagement, character education, and public work. These niches and languages distract us – and youth – from participation in decisions about substantive political issues, and they allow us to avoid the real conflicts and divides that are part of politics.*

However, radical youth workers have sometimes created “opportunities for lived democracy: those tiny, small pockets where real democracy grows” (Jeffs, 2002: 8). Genuine participation in youth projects can give young people confidence to engage in wider political issues; one group for example became “a force to be reckoned with. They don’t sit back and take what is handed out to them” (worker in Flowers, 1998: 40). Hart (1997) argues that young people can participate at different levels and that it is better to involve them in real decisions rather than simulating involvement in structures which are unlikely to listen to them. Examples of youth workers supporting meaningful youth involvement in local politics include Youth Force in the Bronx (Checkoway et al., 2003) and the Lewisham Young Mayor project (Binolved, 2007). Incidentally, it is arguable that youth parliaments have been part of this. However, there is a growing number of young people and youth workers identifying them as little more than acts of tokenism and this has been a political lesson in itself (see Middleton, 2006). Tom Utley (2007) described them as ‘sublimely fatuous’. Richard Pushman (2007) claimed that young people from marginalised groups are under-represented. A report by the Office of Public Management, commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills (2004) was critical of UKYP’s relationship with Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales. See also <http://unicef.org.uk/youthvoice/rights...interview.asp>. particularly *How do you use the CRC in your daily life?*

Anti-oppressive youth work practice tends to be claimed as radical, but this is not necessarily so (Jeffs and Smith, 2003). Spence (2003) found that many young women’s workers refused the label feminist and adopted political moderation as a survival strategy. John (1981) and Williams (1988) found that young people in many black-led youth projects were more politically aware than their youth workers. However, small voluntary organisations in particular have taken radical approaches to anti-oppressive issues. The Hideaway in Moss Side, Manchester was set up in the 1970s to counter negative perceptions of Moss Side and its black young

people. As well as providing social activities, the centre was active in struggles against police violence and racism and was seen as a safe space for black young people during the riots. The Water Adventure Centre, also in Manchester, uses canoeing and water-based play as a basis for youth work and is locally known for its successful feminist work (WAC undated, Pons, 1981).

### **Autonomous spaces**

Libertarian schools such as Summerhill (Neill, 1960) inspired various projects where young people had a high level of autonomy. Marie Paneth was an early pioneer of such spaces, running a children's project during the London blitz with few rules and minimal adult direction. She explained, 'I never interfered with their work, except that I met every attempt to produce anything at all, with approval' (Paneth, 1944: 10). Paneth was an early advocate of adventure playgrounds, which were at their most popular in the 1960s and 1970s. These were areas of often derelict land supervised by adults whose role was to acquire building materials, look after tools and dissuade bullying (Lambert and Pearson, 1974). Although adventure playgrounds were aimed at younger children, teenagers sat on the edges smoking and talking. The freedom of the playgrounds was at odds with their everyday lives, as this teenager found,

*I found that far from settling down to study, as I should, I was restless through lack of freedom I suppose and felt rebellious towards school rules.*

Jakki Hall in Lambert and Pearson, 1974: 75

The Paint House was an independent youth club run by two youth workers from an anarchist perspective. The workers encouraged local young people to use the space, hoping they would take responsibility for it. A group of 'skinheads' adopted the building, repeatedly trashing and re-building it, eventually realising it was an opportunity to have a space of their own.

*When we first come 'ere you told us that this was our place, to do what we liked but we didn't believe you. We tried to force you to tell us what to do . . . we didn't realise that this was the type of place we were looking for.*

young person in Daniel and McGuire, 1972: 55

The workers used the anti-authoritarian values they shared with the young people as a focus but were less effective where values clashed such as on racism. The group members eventually became less racist through relationships with the workers, but in the meantime the building was a safe space for active racists. The balance between autonomy and authority is an inevitable dilemma in this type of youth work. Even the much eulogised Summerhill was at times a haven for subtle forms of bullying (partly revealed in Channel 4's *Cutting Edge* documentary *Summerhill at 70*, first broadcast on 30 March 1992). Other self-run youth projects sprung up in the 1970s and 1980s, often inspired by the Punk movement. For a

time it was not unheard of for young people to run youth clubs, hold keys or be allowed to sleep overnight (Daniel and McGuire, 1972; Leigh and Smart, 1985, personal conversations). Such freedoms are difficult to imagine in the contemporary era of the institutional control mechanisms implicit in risk assessment, inspection, litigation and financial regulation.

### ***Environmental youth work***

Although the environment has been a significant focus of radical political activity in the last 20 years, this has not been reflected in youth work. Despite calls for an increase in environmental youth work (Banks, 1993; Dearling and Armstrong, 1997) this has so far not transpired. Edbrooke (1993) encountered a widespread assumption that environmental education should be confined to schools, although schools tend to concentrate on factual information which fails to change children's behaviour (Morris and Shagen, 1996). Francique (2007) suggests that youth workers feel under-informed about the environment. Connelly (1993) argued that 'issues' such as recycling do not greatly interest most young people, whereas engaging young people in taking action on their surroundings attracts more attention.

Where the environment does appear in youth work, it is usually perceived as uncontroversial rather than as potentially radical (Banks, 1993). Francique (2007: 15) shows a reformist perspective to environmental youth work when she writes, 'What is required is merely a shift in approach rather than a major reorientation'. Others are more controversial. Dearling and Armstrong (1997: 3) ask:

*Should youth work stick to the 'safe' areas such as recycling and tree planting, or can empowerment embrace the Do it Yourself culture of the road and tree protesters?*

Hart (1997) argues that children are likely to be more willing than adults to act on environmental issues because they are less vested in economic systems and spend more time in their local areas.

*There is considerable theoretical reason to believe that concern for the environment is based on an affection that can only come from autonomous, unmediated contact with it.*

Hart, 1997: 20

Groups such as the Woodcraft Folk and Wild Things in Nottinghamshire approach environmental youth work from a social equality perspective (the former since its foundation in 1925) aiming to encourage wider access to varied environments and outdoor activities (Wild Things, 2007; Davis, 2000).

### ***Summary***

While these examples of radical youth work practice may seem marginal, it is worth remembering that youth workers themselves have 'scant resources with which to

challenge the status quo, and can only try to do their best to equip young people to cope with or resist it' (Beresford and Beresford, 1980: 19). These examples bring into sharp focus the dilemmas that are an inevitable aspect of radicalism. Can we engage in state-sponsored initiatives like the participation agenda from a critical rather than a conformist perspective? Are libertarian projects still possible, and can we give experiences of freedom without condoning oppressive beliefs and actions? Why have environmental issues not been a significant focus for struggle and resistance? Radical youth work seems to ask more questions than it answers.

### **A tightrope we walk daily . . . ' Experiences of youth work**

For radical youth workers, everyday practice is 'a tightrope we walk daily, quite often losing our balance, and we only manage to maintain our grip by our fingertips' (Williams, 1988: 117). So far I have neglected this day to day reality; in this section I will redress the balance by reflecting on some of my own experiences. As Richardson (1990: 13) argues, 'much of our experience in education is ODTAA – one damn thing after another'. One way of communicating this complexity of everyday events is through fictional or narrative forms (Clough, 2002; Richardson, 1990). My narrative passages are not fictional, but I find that using aspects of this form enables me to focus on certain details and skip over others without simplifying the issues involved. As Davies argues, practice is often 'the result of improvisation, of expediency, of compromise, even of opportunism' (Davies, 1986: 13). Therefore, rather than selecting 'successful' or representative examples of my experience I have simply chosen memories which illustrate some dilemmas in radical youth work.

*Fifteen teenagers huddle by a local landmark, uncertain and expectant behind their cardboard signs ('SAVE OUR YOUTH SERVICE'). 'Did you just happen to be in town shopping too, then?' asked a colleague, smiling. I smiled back but to tell the truth I was surprised at the question. It has come to something when we can't even admit to supporting young people who want to protect their youth centres and our jobs. Are advocacy and community action no longer part of youth work? I used to joke that a measure of good youth work was whether the young people were fighting the council over something or another. The joke's not funny now. My manager was scared to put up a poster about this protest. Instead, our youth centre walls are decorated with motivational posters demanding pride in our employer even as it makes our colleagues redundant.*

I do not wish to blame my colleagues for being cautious; they were brave to support the young organisers of this protest and I believe some were reprimanded. It's hard to fight for something without admitting you are doing so; it is hard to be an effective activist while hiding. In this case I asserted my right to attend a protest in my own time and refused to lie about why I was there, but I am a junior employee and can get away with it easier than my managers. At other



times I have been more cautious. I've never told this next story to other youth workers, and I am interested in what readers might think . . .

*I was due in court for ripping up genetically modified crops. The young people were indignant that I'd taken a day off in the middle of the summer programme, so I told them and my co-worker about the court case and they all decided to come to court to support me. I was surprised, delighted, but a bit worried how it would look to my manager – and (accidentally on purpose) I never got around to telling him. The astonished look on the usher's face was priceless as twelve black young people entered the public gallery of that small-town-white courtroom. The youngest were escorted out; none of us knew that 'minors' are not allowed in court. The hearing lasted all of ten minutes, but back home we talked for days: should children be allowed to watch court cases; why did I break the law; should people with criminal records become youth workers; what it's like being arrested? I still think this was good youth work . . . but the episode didn't get a mention in my summer report!*

I am unconvinced by my excuses for dishonesty (hiding); I had trustworthy colleagues I could have discussed my decision with. Other types of youth worker dishonesty include 'talking the talk' while doing very little. I have met some politically aware people who talk for hours about problems with government youth policy, institutional sexism or racism in the youth service, and how the bosses know nothing. And yet, there are only a few youth workers I have had these conversations with and then gone out and done a satisfying night of youth work.

*'Forgot my coat' she said, and I wondered if her half-smile was in apology or smug satisfaction at getting one over on me. Eight times I had cycled cold miles to this echoing community centre to work at a mythical youth club, and I hadn't met one young person. My new colleagues worried me, so satisfied as they were moaning about how they and the local young people had been done wrong by the council in the past. Now they collected their wages as some kind of compensation for how they'd been messed about, and they certainly weren't impressed at having me imposed on them, a naïve southerner suggesting that we walk around the estate and get to know some young people for once.*

I've experienced and heard versions of this story many times. But what should be done? The 'new managerial' response would include support and supervision, clear targets and disciplinary action 'as a last resort'. As an anarchist I automatically side with workers against management, but I believe in youth work and get frustrated at colleagues' laziness. Some argue that the council does not own them, so why should they work harder than necessary? My energetic enthusiasm makes me a productive employee; am I the radical? My involvement in youth work is part of my political action in the world whereas for others, it is a job to be skived like any other.

unless I achieve political change through my youth work, who decides who's right and wrong?

*Teamwork'; a word popular in workplaces and youth clubs. I'm suspicious of its managerial overtones, and yet remember wistfully a time when I really felt like part of a team. Each week, several detached youth workers got together to share experiences and discuss things that affected us, from local policies and funding to wider political issues affecting young people and ourselves as workers. Our manager encouraged critical reflection and sprinkled our discussions with theories from Freire and Foucault. These sessions were powerful; I was on the edge of my seat! Our manager encouraged us to take up training opportunities and go to university; to see ourselves as educators and to educate ourselves too. He trusted us, and showed it by dividing the project's budget between us. I have never before or since heard of part-time youth workers being given such financial autonomy. But it was collective autonomy: we answered not just to our manager and the young people we worked with, but also in each weekly meeting we answered to our peers.*

This 'collective autonomy' approach could address laziness and incompetence, but it would serve reactionary as well as radical aims. While some methods may be limited to radical practice, it is values which distinguish it. This is of course the case with all youth work. An example from my experience is the Streetmates group who got together to have a say in the regeneration of their local area. The power and success of this group was that the motivation came from the young people themselves and that their objectives were supported by us youth workers. (If the same young people had wanted to set up a community group to stop asylum seekers from living in their area, I'd have taken a dissuasive role rather than an encouraging one.)

Inevitably I have only skimmed the surface of some of the dilemmas I have struggled with in my own practice. I use my personal experience with the awareness that, 'Historically, it is too often those who seek to liberate who are the most self-deceptive about their own motives' (Magnuson, 2005: 165). Honest critical reflection shared with our peers should go some way to preventing this. As well as oral discussions and academic writing, I am interested in the use of narrative to celebrate and criticise youth work practice from a radical perspective. Richardson (1990: 101) argues:

*Racism and nationalism are kept alive through narratives as well as through structures, and we need – amongst other things – our own oppositional narratives in order to deal with them.*

## Conclusion – taking sides

It would have been easier to write had my focus been on criticising the myriad liberalist influences on youth work rather than looking for the few radical ones. I

wanted to find possibilities and hope, but found my optimism tested. Despite wearing rose-tinted spectacles I did not find it easy to reclaim radical theory and practice, possibly because its history is scattered and barely recorded, its theories vague and its practice contradictory. However, as long as I remain a youth worker I intend to test the potential of radical theory and practice. The alternative is to stand by as youth workers become indistinguishable from other soft-cop public employees such as community wardens, police support officers and neighbour nuisance mediators (versions of which seem to be the state ambitions for community and informal education as professional ends in themselves). These professions have little space for the radical values I identified above (*Towards a theory of 'radical' youth work*, see Chapter 7), 'opposition to capitalism and authoritarianism, belief in equality and respect for the environment'. I believe there is still room for the practice of these values in youth work.

This conclusion builds on discussions in previous sections to propose some key dilemmas and possibilities for future attempts at radical youth work practice. The dilemmas are questions which the writing of this chapter has brought into sharp focus for me. Although I have strong feelings about the issues they raise, they are dilemmas because I cannot yet see a clear way forward. The possibilities are my proposals for radical youth workers, guidelines I intend to test out in my future practice. Although I will use the inclusive pronoun 'we' to refer to those who identify with the definition of radical youth work I proposed in *Towards a theory of 'radical' youth work*, I do not mean to assume common agreement. I suggest rather that these dilemmas and possibilities would benefit from further discussion and debate.

## ***Five dilemmas***

### ***1. Can we be principled and work for the state?***

Youth workers hide behind the excuse that we support young people in what they want rather than acting on our own values (Flowers, 1998). This is nonsensical unless we only work with young people we broadly agree with; I have yet to meet a youth worker who helped young fascist sympathisers with their leaflet distribution. If radicalism includes taking sides against structural forces of capitalism and state control, shouldn't we openly make our judgements and act as strongly against these as we (should) do against racism? The dilemma is that youth work has been subsumed into capitalism. Fighting this would mean opposing systems that our jobs require us to comply with such as the direct surveillance of young people through computerised monitoring systems.

### ***2. Can we challenge common sense?***

New managerialism in youth work is culturally enforced through the tyranny of 'good practice'. Things which were debateable are now the norm: minor health and safety risks override freedom to develop innovative projects and young people's

need for exciting, demanding experiences; monitoring requirements undermine confidentiality, and accredited 'benchmarks' challenge the principle of informality. Just as we encourage young people to think critically, we too need to think for ourselves, questioning and debating the new common sense. As with the previous dilemma, taking action on these issues could be more daunting.

### **3. How do we balance principles and funding?**

The state controls youth workers most effectively through the targeting of resources rather than through compulsory reforms (see Chapter 7 *Controllers or liberators? Radical influences on youth work struggles* above). There is no clear solution for youth workers fearing for their jobs or attracted by improved facilities, but this question cannot be dodged. Many of us are seduced by offers of funding, becoming materialist in the guise of 'getting what's best for the young people'. To maximise our freedom from the state, we may need to explore how to run independent youth projects without funding, but would this mean doing the state's job for free?

### **4. How can radical youth workers avoid disillusionment?**

Burn out and exhaustion affect youth workers of all political perspectives. Radicals experience particular stress because we constantly negotiate the contradictions between our deeply felt convictions and the policies and practices of our employers. If we voice our opinions and act on our principles we are labelled as 'troublemakers' and risk our funding, job or status. In addition, it is inevitably stressful to live in a world which is far from how we would like it to be. And yet, without hope we become disillusioned and ineffective.

### **5. Can youth work ever change anything?**

Youth work in itself has changed little on a structural level. At best, our actions are small-scale and their consequences might only become apparent years later. One possibility is to remain involved in other political activism as well as being a youth worker. The success of youth work as political action relies heavily on feminist 'personal is political' theories. Structural change, on the other hand, may be supported by radical youth work but is unlikely to result from it. This can make daily practice feel rather hollow.

## **Five possibilities**

### **1. Developing collective autonomy as workers**

Collective autonomy means exploiting freedoms and spaces as we find them, but as part of a community rather than as unaccountable mavericks. We should create collectives at different levels, from our own work teams to national networks. Different types of existing networks include trade unions, the Federation for

Detached Youth Work and the Critical Chatting group.<sup>2</sup> As part of networks we can discuss and debate ideas and take joint action. Being part of a collective can address burn out and isolation, and reduces the ease with which individual 'troublemakers' can be targeted by the state.

## **2. Developing collective autonomy among young people**

Autonomous spaces are among the most important things youth work can offer. This does not mean we should let young people do everything they want, but we could explicitly aim to make youth clubs available for young people to use with some degree of freedom and self organisation. Play workers talk of providing 'compensatory space' for children who have few opportunities for freedom and adventure in today's society. Teenagers (and adults) need play and adventure too, but society curtails this impulse even more strongly than in younger children. We should create spaces which compensate for the authoritarianism young people meet everywhere they go, not seem to be more of the same.

## **3. Educating ourselves**

In recent years, youth work theorists have increasingly argued the need to learn from history (Gilchrist et al., 2001, 2003; Davies, 1986). There has been a growth in written history and discussion forums such as the History of Community and Youth Work conferences.<sup>3</sup> We should engage in these conferences, read relevant literature, and youth workers should reflect and write about their own experiences and histories. Those of us who are interested in theory should explore alternative ways to share this interest, not confine it to documents that most youth workers don't have the time or the inclination to read.

## **4. Educating young people**

Most radicals agree that youth work aims to educate, but for what? Our 'curriculum' (can a curriculum be informal? – the word informal comes from New Latin meaning 'course') should be powerful, not pointless. This could include learning how authority structures work sharing skills of political involvement, exploring the environment and history of local areas, and learning about inequalities and environmental destruction. If we fail to move beyond the constraints of schooling (*Deschooling Society*, Illich, 1971) what is the point of using the tool of informal education? We need to consider our reasons for doing any work that is neither excitingly educational nor the practice of autonomy and adventure.

## **5. Regaining our commitment to youth work**

While the concept of wage labour is problematic to me as an anarchist, I would choose to spend time in dialectical activity with teenagers even in my utopian

<sup>2</sup>See for example [www.cywu.org.uk](http://www.cywu.org.uk), [www.unison.org.uk/localgov/youthcommunity.asp](http://www.unison.org.uk/localgov/youthcommunity.asp), [www.detachedyouth-work.info](http://www.detachedyouth-work.info), <http://critically-chatting.0catch.com>

<sup>3</sup>See [http://www.infed.org/events/history\\_conference\\_2007.htm](http://www.infed.org/events/history_conference_2007.htm)

post-revolutionary society. Even for those who would not, it is worth finding something to commit to in youth work for the sake of ourselves and the young people we work with. Workers who would rather be in their garden could fill their youth club with plants and grow vegetables in window boxes. Those who dream of the forest or the sea might take young people there whenever they can. As well as following young people's existing interests youth work could also work with them to broaden their horizons, and using our own interests is consistent with this. It might also be a way for some of us to commit to youth work once more.

The theory and practice of radical youth work is scattered, messy and contradictory, but this does not excuse sitting on the fence. History shows that a passive response to government interventions has resulted in youth work becoming increasingly embroiled in the capitalist project, latterly by the seeming state intention to remould it exclusively into bourgeois and reactionary interpretations of informal and community education routes. In pursuit of funding, or simply to follow the latest guidelines, we increasingly monitor and control the most vulnerable young people, or lose contact with those young people, by concentrating on accreditation and formal programmes. History also shows that radical workers can influence the direction of youth work as well as organising projects for freedom and against authoritarianism, for the environment and against capitalism, for equality and against oppression. Through dialectic with colleagues and young people, we need to work out which side we are on. Unless we want capitalism and social control to become permanently entrenched in youth work by way of state sanctioned and monitored 'education' that are in reality propaganda and the means of indoctrination, neutrality is not an option!

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