

For a Critical Emancipatory and Democratic Education



IN DEFENCE OF YOUTH WORK – indefenceofyouthwork.com

The Campaign's emergence in 2009 was a passionate response to the assault on the voluntary tradition of youth work presented by the imposed relationships and prescribed outcomes, favoured by New Labour. In the aftermath of the 2008 banking crisis some of us wondered if the tide might be turning against the neo-liberal wave of privatisation, both of individual existence and public services. Our optimism was fleeting. Indeed under the Coalition local authority youth services have been devastated, whilst the contours of work with young people shift from the open and informal to the closed and formal.

Within this climate the Campaign has proved to be something of a shelter in the storm, where critical dissent and collective support is still encouraged. Across the past five years we have established our annual conference as a significant event in the diary; organised an ongoing series of Engaging Critically seminars on such subjects as 'The Marketisation of the Sector', '[The Illusion of Outcomes](#)' and 'Politics and Ethics'; and continued to run our praised programme of Story-Telling workshops, one consequence of which has been our acclaimed book, '[This is Youth Work : Stories from Practice](#)'. Our [web site](#) and [FaceBook page](#) underpin our endeavours on a day-to-day basis, attracting a steady stream of support – an average of 325 visitors to the site every week and over 1200 following lively FB exchanges. This is no mean feat.

However circumstances do not stand still. It is a moment to be self-critical. Targeted work imposed from above is increasingly the norm with the worker's script prepared in advance. The leading youth agencies are complicit in the state's attempt to denude youth work of its particular meaning, content to use the term as they think fit to describe all manner of interventions into young people's lives. Against this backdrop we are forced to ask if we are being precious in defending a young person-centred practice, which unfolds from below?

We don't think so. We stand by the cornerstones set out in [the original Open Letter](#):

- *the primacy of the voluntary relationship, from which the young person can withdraw without compulsion or sanction;*
- *a commitment to a critical dialogue, to the creation of informal educational opportunities starting from young people's agendas;*
- *the need to work with and encourage the growth of young people's own autonomous networks, recognising the significance of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and faith in shaping their choices and opportunities;*
- *the importance of valuing and attending to their here-and-now as well as to their 'transitions';*
- *the nurturing of a self-conscious democratic practice, tipping balances of power in young people's favour;*
- *the significance of the worker themselves, their room for autonomy, their ability to fashion an improvised, yet rehearsed practice.*

Yet for many workers pursuing these principles is shadowed by contradiction and constraint. They struggle to preserve the integrity of their relationships with young people. They find themselves 'ducking and diving', endeavouring to be 'in and against' the behavioural modification implicit in the manufacturing of [the Young Foundation's 'emotionally resilient' young person](#), willing to put up with whatever the system throws at them. Workers are pressured to individualise both their own and young people's situations. They are haunted by colleagues, who have embraced wilfully or otherwise the pseudo-scientific illusions of the outcomes agenda. Our suspicion and concern is that the Campaign has come across as failing to understand sufficiently these tensions.

Thus a central challenge in the coming period is to find a way of retaining our commitment to youth work as a distinctive site of practice, whilst reaching out to and respecting the endeavours of youth workers, who find themselves in alternative settings. In hoping to do so we suggest that it might be liberating to think of ourselves first and foremost as 'democratic educators', who share the same humanistic values, whether religious or secular, and the same body of 'people' skills, even if we draw upon them in differing ways within our different circumstances. Indeed it is positive perchance to position ourselves within a global community of 'democratic educators' practising within youth services, social services, schools, further and higher education, within adult and community education. Closer to home it means that we need to relate questioningly, yet supportively to one another, wherever we find ourselves— in the youth club, on the streets, with referred individuals as part of a case-load, in the schools inclusion programme, in the class room or lecture hall.

It is nigh impossible to exaggerate the need to be collective in the face of a neo-liberal ideology that seeks to undermine the slightest hint of oppositional solidarity. In our first five years we have sought to build links with fellow travellers such as the [Social Work Action Network \[SWAN\]](#), the [National Coalition for Independent Action \[NCIA\]](#), the [Federation for Detached Youth Work](#), the [Radical Education Forum](#), the on-line journals, [Youth & Policy](#) and [CONCEPT](#), together with [Choose Youth](#) and the youth work trade unions. Spreading the net wider we are involved in a range of European initiatives, in particular the birth of [Professional Open Youth Work Europe \[POYWE\]](#), alongside opening a dialogue across the oceans to the USA and Australia. Apart from London and the North-East we have been much less successful in encouraging the flowering of local and regional IDYW groups. This is a major weakness. In truth it means we are a campaign with an appreciative, but largely passive following, relying on the endeavours of a small number of activists to keep the flame burning.

More voices need to be raised in debate and activity if we are to respond to the challenges lying before us. Many of these issues are highlighted within the emergence of [the Institute for Youth Work](#), with which we have been constructive, about which we have remained agnostic, for example,

- *the relationship between the so-called statutory and voluntary sectors, indeed the very character of these sectors today with the latter compromising its independence in pursuit of the State's approval.*
- *the significance of the creation of a binding code of ethics.*
- *the contradictions of the 'professionalisation' imperative, the drive towards a 'licence to practice' and the question of where this leaves both an army of volunteers and a range of autonomous practice.*

In all of this politics won't go away, whether in the profound sense of 'who holds power, in whose interests do they wield that power and how can it be contested?' or in the narrower world of the party political, where once again we are being asked to put our trust in Labour. Young people themselves continue to suffer as a consequence of a host of restrictive and authoritarian policies. Whilst we try to highlight through our web site and social networking the burden they are shouldering, we remain distant as a campaign, apart from when resistance to closures has kicked off, notably in Oxfordshire and Newcastle. Meanwhile mainstream youth work seems in denial about 'a generation without a future' in terms of jobs, housing and independence, contenting itself with extolling the virtues of the '[Step Up To Serve](#)' initiative, within which social action is divested of its radical meaning, reduced to volunteering and good works for others.

Looking forward we propose the following priorities for the Campaign:

- *To confirm our role as a critical conscience, catalysing dissenting debate about the issues facing youth work and young people and being clear that our small, voluntary initiative cannot be a substitute for trade union activity or involvement in the pluralist pressure group, Choose Youth.*
- *To maintain, therefore, our commitment to organising across the country 'Engaging Critically seminars' and to encourage contributions to and involvement in the IDYW web site and Facebook.*
- *To continue developing 'Story-Telling' as a method of reflection upon and evaluation of practice through the creation of a 'This is Youth Work' Book 2 and through projects such as a mooted European conference, in which there is substantial interest.*
- *To nurture the setting up of local and regional support/campaign groups, within which workers can share the ups and downs of their specific situations, drawing strength from the collective dialogue.*

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