

In Defence of Youth Work

This is Youth Work: Stories from Practice



Published by **In Defence of Youth Work**
Designed and printed by **UNISON**

Contents

Acknowledgements	5		
1. Setting the Scene	6		
2. Context	9		
3. Twelve youth work stories	12		
<i>As seen by the youth worker</i>			
Holding onto your dignity: Supporting Black young people harassed by the police	12	Beyond aggression to eye contact: Struggling for trust in a city centre drop in	26
'On the boundary': Three years detached work with a group of young women	15	Beyond stereotype and prejudice: Developing youth work with traveller young women	28
Creative improvisation: A youth work response to 'knife crime'	17	<i>As seen by young people</i>	
Pen and paper youth work	20	'I wouldn't be the person I am today': One young man on why young people need youth clubs	32
The power of graffiti: Detached youth work in a town centre 'hot spot'	21	A modest journey in self-discovery: Reflections on a mentoring 'resi'	33
Getting accredited: Youth work as a virtual trip 'down under'	23	Surviving, learning and growing: The youth centre as sanctuary.	34
Casual – or informal?: Coffee bar careers advice	25	4. Practising	37
		5. What future for youth work?	48
		6. Campaigning and educating	49
		Further information	51

Acknowledgements

As the In Defence of Youth Work (IDYW) 'Stories' project has throughout been a collective effort, thanking a long list of individuals doesn't seem appropriate. However, the contributions must be acknowledged of:

The young people who agreed to be filmed for the DVD.

The workers who – in some cases through many drafts – provided such telling insights into youth work practice.

The institutions and organisations and their staff who sponsored 'stories' events and supported workers in writing them up.

Heather Johnson of Regensis Media for her creativity in putting together the DVD.

Jethro Brice for his unique and thought-provoking illustrations.

The UNISON and Unite/CYWU unions and their officers who have shown such commitment to the project.

The Youth & Policy editorial collective who, having published some of the booklet material, readily agreed to it being republished.

The many IDYW activists whose energy and enthusiasm have made the whole initiative possible.

And last but not least the pioneers of the past, who laid the foundations for an emancipatory youth work and today's young people, youth workers and communities, who through their protests and struggles have shown their commitment to defending and extending this democratic inheritance.



1. Setting the scene



What is Youth Work?

For those involved in doing it, whether voluntary or paid, whatever their ideological differences, there has long been a consensus. It ought to be founded on a voluntary engagement with young people in their leisure time. It ought to be informal and educational, focused on the personal, social and political awareness of the young people drawn to its provision. Over the last twenty years successive governments have undermined these defining characteristics. Armed with an often negative view of youth they have introduced an increasingly narrow raft of measures, whereby youth work has been pushed ever nearer to being no more than an agency of behavioural modification or the mere provider of predetermined 'positive activities'.

The growing unease about this very threat to the future of open and pluralist youth work led to the creation of the In Defence of Youth Work (IDYW) Campaign back in March 2009. Composed of part-time and full-time workers across the voluntary and state sectors, managers, lecturers and researchers, our grass-roots organisation has sought to challenge the imposition upon the contradictory, creative process of youth work of its very antithesis: prescribed and predictable outcomes. Nevertheless the instrumental agenda prevails. The Coalition encourages an increasing emphasis on early intervention programmes aimed at young people deemed to be recalcitrant or at risk. Youth workers disappear and become youth social workers with a case-load of problematic individuals in need of correction. To compound matters the drastic public expenditure cuts, as the

Report of the Education Select Committee into youth services confirms, are leading in one local authority after another to the disappearance of youth work as informal education.

Against this tide of reaction our Campaign reaffirms its belief in a democratic and emancipatory youth work, whose cornerstones are:

- The sanctity of the voluntary principle; the freedom for young people to enter into and withdraw from Youth Work as they so wish.
- A commitment to conversations with young people which start from their concerns and within which both youth worker and young person are educated and out of which opportunities for new learning and experience can be created.



- The importance of association, of fostering supportive relationships, of encouraging the development of autonomous groups and 'the sharing of a common life'.
- A commitment to valuing and attending to the here-and-now of young people's experience rather than just focusing on 'transitions'.
- An insistence upon a democratic practice, within which every effort is made to ensure that young people play the fullest part in making decisions about anything affecting them.
- The continuing necessity of recognising that young people are not a homogeneous group and that issues of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and faith remain central.

- The essential significance of the youth worker themselves, whose outlook, integrity and autonomy is at the heart of fashioning a serious yet humorous, improvisatory yet rehearsed educational practice with young people.

Of course there are other forms of work with young people, but defining these as youth work confuses rather than clarifies the dilemmas we face. The plethora of targeted interventions need to be named for what they are: youth social work, youth welfare work, youth diversionary work, and so on. Whilst it can be argued that some of these programmes are necessary and that they are delivered by committed practitioners, they all share a prescribed agenda and an imposed relationship. The present demise of the youth work we seek to define and defend says much about today's creeping

authoritarianism and a fear of the unpredictable and creative.

We see ourselves, whether paid or voluntary, as informal educators contributing to 'the common good'. Thus the need to be accountable to elected representatives, management, communities and especially young people themselves is fully recognised, which is where our Stories Project comes in. From the beginning of the Campaign we have wanted to call the bluff on that feigned ignorance, which claims youth work is a bit of a mystery and asks 'how we do know it's doing any good, giving value for money?' Indeed at our very first national conference in Manchester the debate focused on how we might illustrate the qualitative dimension of a youth work practice, which sees young people as the active and critical citizens essential to an authentic democracy. In recent times there has been a

massive management-led effort to sidestep the dilemma of how to measure changes in personal and collective consciousness. Rather than grappling with the question it has been easier to concentrate on numbers attending or contacts made, reassuring to insist that the youth work experience be shoehorned into forms of engagement that can be accredited. In this way a mass of data has been compiled. However these statistics tell us little about the quality of the process and fail to put us in touch with the ups and downs of working with awkward, life-enhancing real human beings.

The key to getting a real feel for the work is to become familiar with and sensitive to the profusion of tales, small and large, that make up the youth work saga. It is hoped that the sequence of stories to be found below and the context provided will inspire a renewed debate about how



1. Setting the scene

the success or otherwise of youth work is evaluated.

Getting to know whether youth work is proving to be effective or adding value will not come about by its funders or its managers sitting passively in their offices waiting for the monthly figures of inputs and outcomes. Neither will it be resolved via the use of structured questionnaires measuring well-being, the completion of which will be mandatory for young people. It will come about only if the methods used are congruent with and indeed integral to the voluntary engagement that makes youth work so distinctive as a practice with young people. It will come about only if decision-makers, youth workers and young people enter into consistent, critical conversations with one another about what makes youth work tick. It will come about only if youth work is democratic through and through.

2. Context

The need to spread understanding of the emancipatory forms of youth work practice outlined in 'Setting the Scene' and to defend the services through which these are provided has never been more urgent. Though the ConDem government talks grandly of developing a youth policy, the June 2011 House of Commons' Education Select Committee report on youth services made very clear its disappointment with its 'lack of urgency in articulating a ... strategic vision'. Indeed, as this booklet and the accompanying DVD are being completed in the summer of 2011 youth work facilities are paying a very high price for a global economic crisis caused by what a high level US report has called the 'human action and inaction' of powerful financial interests. As part of a manic drive to abandon publicly-funded services, where Youth Services haven't (in the words of Warwickshire County Council)

simply been 'ceased', they've been both cut to the bone - budgets for 2011-12 down by an estimated £100m, jobs by 3,000 - and widely restructured as a youth social work version of 'early intervention'. The choices facing much voluntary sector youth provision have also become stark: in effect privatise as a 'social enterprise' and increasingly, and uncritically, take on the state's business; or cut staff and facilities - or go out of business.

To date the ConDems only identifiable commitment to 'youth' has been its so-called 'National Citizens Service'. With a very limited brief and reliant on low paid staff whose credentials are at best unclear, this, unlike Youth Service provision, is aimed only at 16-19 year olds and will operate for only six or seven weeks over the summer. Against the background of the decimation of the Youth Service nationally, its continued

development in its current form was dismissed by the Select Committee as unsupportable.

Though offering some positive assessments of young people's potential and some passing endorsements of their voluntary participation in open-access youth work, the Select Committee also however carried some other much less acceptable messages; in particular, its taken-for-granted assumptions that the days of direct state sponsorship for youth work are over and that the only way forward is through commissioning (that is, competition) and 'social enterprises', perhaps paid by results and needing ultimately to turn a profit on their activities.

These assaults on both state and voluntary sector youth services have been fiercely opposed by the UNISON and Unite unions, by a 'Choose Youth' campaign, by





2. Context

voluntary organisations like the Woodcraft Folk and the British Youth Council and by campaigning groups like IDYW and the National Coalition for Independent Action. Most strikingly, young people have unambiguously asserted how much youth work matters to them', with their 'voice' being heard in ways - out on the streets, within council meetings, lobbying politicians - which even policy-makers in favour of 'empowerment' had clearly never intended. This publication and the narratives it contains seeks to supplement and support these campaigns by presenting to that wider audience something of the distinctiveness and the complexities of youth work, what constitutes quality practice, how it contributes to outcomes young people value and 'society' seeks - and why therefore public policy should continue to support and fund this practice, its practitioners and managers.

Even before the present government wreaked its devastation on the country's Youth Services, IDYW had already been challenging New Labour policies. To meet top-down targets, youth work's focus had been significantly narrowed, seriously undermining some of its defining features. Increasingly workers had been required to concentrate on pre-labelled groups, boxing them into providing diversionary (albeit 'positive') activities largely designed to keep young people off the streets and out of adults' way.

This work sometimes came with (relatively) generous funding - from the police, housing associations, the Youth Justice Board, even anti-terrorist budgets. However, as funders demanded quite specific 'outcomes', scope for responding to young people's concerns as they might define them was severely reduced. Work in schools

for example was directed largely at retaining 'failing' pupils in education. 'Youth inclusion' and 'community safety' projects by definition focused on diverting young people from 'anti social behaviour'. Programmes with young Muslims were expected to concentrate on 'preventing violent extremism'.

Increasingly, these priorities removed resources from open access provision - historically the bedrock of youth work. Greater emphasis was placed on profiling young people in advance of a youth worker's contact with them and on sharing their personal information with other professionals. These trends were exacerbated by New Labour's integration of youth workers into multi-disciplinary teams most often focused on 'working on' rather than 'with' 'challenging' individuals. As some youth workers took on case loads

and participated in formalised assessment procedures, their core role - engaging and developing relationships with young people's self-chosen groups - was devalued.

Over time the practice was thus misinterpreted and then redefined by agencies whose own targets it was helping to meet but whose staff often had little or no background in and understanding of youth work. In buying into what they saw as the youth work approach, professionals from other disciplines often failed to recognise the complex processes of dialogue and shared activity and learning between young person and worker which were needed to achieve the outcomes they wanted - and which the stories presented in the booklet seek to illustrate.

However, while resisting this subversion of youth work's definition, IDYW has recognised that the benefits of this practice are



not always immediately apparent, perhaps particularly to a policy-maker or manager from a different profession. When viewed from the outside little may appear to be going on, especially if the setting is 'merely' recreational. This may be true even when youth workers are initiating and then - often over long periods - sustaining penetrating conversations with young people which slowly shape ideas for a project and generate new practical, social and emotional learning. As these relationships develop, young people may also begin, often drip-drip, to let go of personal information, prompting workers to offer advice and other forms of individual support. Through these processes, too, young people's awareness of social issues may grow, leading to forms of 'religious' and 'citizenship' education very different from those they meet in school, all set within an environment which meets young

people's bottom-line expectation - that along the way fun will be had!

Youth workers have sometimes been slow in getting these messages out to a wider audience. Some indeed have been too ready to take on the jargon of funding bodies, suggesting that youth work can meet unrealisable expectations - reduce teenage pregnancies by X%, cut a geographical area's first time entries into the youth justice system by Y%, get Z% of Not in Education Employment or Training (NEETs) back into education. Though youth work might be making its contributions, direct cause and effect can rarely be so quantified or even so explicitly identified.

It was to counter New Labour's resort to the simplistic number-crunching and 'tick-boxing' which dominated its monitoring and evaluation of youth work that IDYW decided that, as an alternative way

of publicly accounting for youth workers' practice, it would gather the 'coal-face' 'stories' which follow. Guaranteeing anonymity and confidentiality, the stories have come from different parts of the country, reflecting a range of young people's backgrounds and a variety of youth work settings, aims and outcomes. While not intended to stand as best practice exemplars, they seek to illustrate the everyday complexity and uncertainty - the often 'unfinished' nature - of the process which so characterises youth work in action. Most were the product of specially arranged day events at which, in small groups, workers supported each other to articulate and then interrogate a piece of their practice which, for them, best answered the question: "How does youth work achieve its special impact on young people and their lives?" The common threads of the stories which together begin to provide an answer to this question

have been drawn out in the final 'Practising' section.

Though most of the stories are recounted from a worker's perspective, some capture a little of how young people experience or, looking back, have experienced that practice and what they feel they have taken from it. These narratives are further strongly reinforced by the testimonies in the accompanying DVD and supplemented by occasional quotations from the workers interviewed. Taken together this material provides campaigners with vivid and telling evidence on how a vital and productive practice with young people works and why the staff posts and expertise through which it achieves its impacts need to go on being vigorously defended.

3. Twelve youth work stories



Holding onto your dignity: Supporting Black young people harassed by the police

Black young people from a large housing estate complained to the local youth workers that they were constantly being stopped and searched by police, particularly if they hung around near a local shop where some of them might be searched several times in an evening. The estate is predominantly white though with a significant Black community - perhaps 15-20%. White young people said it also happened to them when they were out with Black friends. The young people also said that the police often refused to give them the stop and search sheet when they asked for it.

One fourteen year old for example said he'd been accused of being a

drug dealer when officers found he had two phones on him. He'd tried to explain that one was his new phone but had no calling credit, so he was still carrying his old phone because it still had credit and not everybody had his new number. Officers wouldn't listen - they seemed determined to find further evidence that he was selling drugs.

Another twelve year old told the youth workers that he'd been stopped and searched on the street by officers who told him they'd received complaints of a BB gun being used in the area by a 'boy who fits your description'. He took this to mean that they were Black.

Youth workers themselves saw this happening first hand.

The police inspector for the area had made contact with the youth workers when he had come into post a year or so before. There had

been some discussion between police and youth workers about how police could improve their poor relationships with young people in the area. However, youth workers had been unable to find a way to bring the police in without endangering the sense of ownership of the youth club and its space which the new area youth worker was fostering for young people.

After talking to the young people about the police action the youth workers agreed to invite the neighbourhood police team into the youth club so that the young people could talk to them about the stop and search activity on their own terms. When the youth work team made this decision, they invited the sergeant in to discuss how they could work together. He brought one of his colleagues, a very young beat officer. The area youth worker made it absolutely clear that this would be an invitation which

3. Twelve youth work stories



applied to that day and time only and would not stand as an open invitation for officers to arrive unannounced in the future. She clarified what youth workers hoped to get from the session and another youth worker outlined some of the anecdotal evidence young people had described and why the need for some reparative work had arisen.

The youth project was opened for this session outside of normal opening hours to make sure that the young people who came knew clearly that this was what they were attending. There were snacks available and young people were able to play pool and look at police handcuffs. There were about twenty young people at the session, including about five of the Black young men who'd experienced stop and search.

About eight of the neighbourhood police team came, including

beat officers and local Police Community Support Officers. The police acknowledged a number of the young men by name as they entered the building. They knew the names because of the searches, not because these young people had criminal records or had any other reason to be 'known' to the police.

The police wanted to explain to the young people why they had to do stop and search. Youth workers reinforced messages about young people's rights and responsibilities through a question and answer session. One young man described how he had been humiliated by the police by being asked to remove his shoes and coat in public on repeated occasions. He said how much he hated the police as a result of this humiliation. The young people said that one of the officers at the meeting never gave them the stop and search sheets that he was supposed to. Some police were

shocked that this was happening and shocked to hear how much the young people hated them as a result of the searches. The police were asked to think about how it would feel if they were treated in the way that they were treating these young people.

Officers were initially very defensive. The young man who stated that he hated the police had sat in silence, playing Playstation throughout the session and speaking to youth workers but making no eye contact with the police. He would not have spoken at all but one officer asked 'who here still hates the police after meeting us all today?' At this point he replied loudly 'I do'. He went on to describe how he is frequently stopped on a very busy public road and searched.

The youth workers knew that the young people had made an enormous leap of faith by trusting

them and attending the meeting. They said that their parents either didn't believe them or couldn't do anything about the stop and search. One young man said his father had been at home when he had been stopped and searched outside his own house. He was worried that his father would be furious if he looked out and saw what was happening. The young people said that the middle class professionals they knew seemed to have no idea about what they were feeling.

The project bought a bus pass for the young man who described being constantly stopped and searched on his walk home every day. He lived in a hostel on a long, busy road where there is a heavy police presence and it was usually here he was stopped. This helped as he did not have to walk the length of the road, thus coming to the attention of the police, but he is still being stopped by the police.

3. Twelve youth work stories



Although the searches continued just as before, the young people feel differently. They are still angry but they have heard the police acknowledge that they have rights. They know they are in the right even though the police continue to search them. They now have a sense of solidarity and an affirmation of their experiences. The youth workers have shown that they believe and understand

the young people's feelings – for example, understanding why the young people run when they see the police even though they haven't done anything wrong.

Retrospect

The young man with the bus pass recently came into the centre to see the youth workers (he now lives out of the area). He discussed the session and described how, although it was painful at the time to be confronted in a safe forum by those he saw as enemies, it was a relief to vent some of his anger. He recalled how the youth workers had told him honestly that they could not change what was happening but that he could change his reaction. He was advised to stay calm, ask for a stop and search sheet after the event and to discuss his feelings around the searches with them as often as he needed to. The area youth worker buying him a bus pass

had made him feel that he was being believed and listened to.

Postscripts

1. A young Black male youth worker was taking this same group of young men to the cinema as part of an alternative programme of provision for excluded young people. A few minutes away from the centre the group was stopped by two PCSOs. A riot van quickly arrived and an officer jumped out to ask where the group was going and what they were doing. When the youth worker explained his role and the purpose of their visit, the officer returned to his vehicle - without conducting a search.
2. The young man with the bus pass was still regularly being stopped - had, in fact, recently been stopped and told that

he fitted the description of a 12 year old runaway. As he is very tall and heavily built, easily passing for being in his twenties, he asked the officer what the description was and was told that the runaway was 'Black and wearing a hat'. He was able to laugh about this with the youth worker, saying that the police no longer succeed in humiliating him in the way that they did. He can now, he feels, walk away from the searches with dignity.



‘On the boundary’: Three years of detached work with a group of young women



The youth work focused on six young women whose chaotic relationships with each other and with their families offered them little stability in their lives. Within the group, arguments tended to be sorted out by threatening or

aggressive reactions, particularly from two of the girls, with much of their behaviour being alcohol-related. In their neighbourhood their activities were causing ‘anarchy’, resulting in abuse to themselves and serious problems for the wider community.

The group was first engaged through detached youth work, though this was a struggle, especially on Bonfire night. However, by working with the young women as a group and taking them, on their own ‘turf’, for who they were, conversations started to develop. Through these, interests and strengths as well as needs began to emerge. One young woman for example was able to enter into a proper dialogue while all showed a concern to improve their community. They also turned up when they said they would and made their own arrangements for meeting the youth workers.

Through the detached work, opportunities opened up for the workers to demonstrate acceptance, offer support and follow through on promises made – such as finding a football team for one of the young women to join. The youth workers stayed consistent in when and where they met the group, eventually responding to the girls’ need for somewhere warm and safe to go by offering them the youth centre as a meeting place – something which they had requested.

As they weren’t required to join an existing group, the young women were able to go on attending the centre as a group. They increasingly then began to make more demands on the youth workers’ time – by for example negotiating sessions for themselves on sexual health, drugs and alcohol. Though they weren’t liked by other young people using the centre, working with them as

an established friendship group gave them attention in their own right. Over time, the dynamics of the group changed - they became chatty, talked and also listened to each other and acted protectively to each other.

They also became jealous for staff time with the activities they agreed to do often seeming less important to the group than spending time with the youth workers. On occasions their professional relationship with the youth workers could spill over into the personal – for example when, on Boxing Day, one of the young women phoned one of the youth workers who, she felt, was the only person able to help her. This for the youth worker illustrated two things: how much youth work, for it to be effective, had to happen ‘on the boundaries’; and how, far from being ‘just a job’, it had to ‘go the extra mile’, remain ‘open door’, on-going, unfinished.

3. Twelve youth work stories



This piece of practice also demonstrated to the youth workers how much could be developed out of and through a small tight friendship group. However, the work never fitted easily into the local service's approach, with other workers being critical of it for focusing only on a small group. Nor, as it only ever involved six young people, was it seen by managers as cost effective work within the youth centre. When the project manager closed it down 'as of today', the workers enrolled the young women onto a NEET programme and continued to work with them on the streets. With the young women's achievements only counting once as 'accreditation outcomes', the workers also had to resist a range of other administrative and evaluation pressures. Over the three years, they also had to play a juggling game over funding, passing the group from one funding stream

to another in order to justify the youth work that was being done.

As a piece of face-to-face practice, the work was never straightforward. One member of the group who was too young to join the NEET programme or to take part with the other girls in an exciting sailing event was put on an ASBO and, after the group stopped meeting, was given a custodial sentence. Throughout however she managed to keep a positive relationship with the youth centre.

Over three years the way the young women dealt with the pressures they faced began to change. They did litter picks and ran a gardening programme and planting project, taking on board that this kind of community engagement would challenge the negative way they were seen by their wider community, the community wardens and the police.

They got involved in the Council's Youth Forum, consulting with other young people on how they saw the problems facing them, until eventually they became the face of the youth centre. They raised some large sums of money for the project and one of the group won a young achievers award for service to their community.

In the process, their view of themselves changed, too. No longer did they see themselves as 'scum'. Individually, they started to feel comfortable being on their own as their need lessened for the security of each other's company in order to achieve what they wanted. One of the girls decided to leave the area as the best way to succeed while two of them went on to become youth workers – a career route opened up for one of them after being appointed a 'young advocate'. The youth workers also on occasions drew on the trust

built into their relationships with the young women to challenge them, sometimes in quite personal ways. When for example one of the young women seemed to be setting herself up to fail by applying for an educational course for which she was not yet ready, one of the youth workers felt able, in a very up-front way, to advise her to postpone the application until she'd got more experience and qualifications, steering her instead towards an alternative opportunity.

Creative improvisation: A youth work response to 'knife crime'



The relationships youth workers make in the youth centre often do not stay in the youth centre because, sharing the same shops, parks and streets with young people, these can all become meeting places. The work and

project described here began when Helen, a youth worker on the Greenville estate, saw Adam when she was visiting a local park with her family. In fact, it wasn't really 'an encounter' as she saw him but he did not see her – or if he did he didn't let on.

Helen's youth work 'nose' told her that, from the way Adam was carrying himself, he was carrying a knife concealed under his jacket. The next time she saw him was at the youth centre. He came in, milled around talking to friends, played pool – at no point did he approach her, nor she him. However as, alone, he was leaving at the end of the evening she went over to him, asked how he was, exchanged news. She eventually asked him if anything was bothering him. She was concerned for him, she said, because she'd seen him earlier in the park. She didn't ask him to confirm or deny whether he had a

knife - she just allowed him to take the time to consider that she'd seen him and draw the conclusion that she knew he had been carrying a knife. She didn't see it as a test – nor did she want a definite answer. She knew that, in such situations, if a conversation with a young person was to keep going, sometimes some ambiguity in the discussion had to be allowed to sustain a level of comfort and anonymity.

Adam knew that Helen knew that his brother was already in prison for a knife-related offence and she knew the devastating impact that this had on Adam and his family. A lot of 'knowing' was passing between them even though not many words had been exchanged over the years. Though Adam was conscious of and sensitive to this, he was also aware that black young men were being subjected to very high levels of stop-and-search – something that was true

of Greenville which also included the park and the youth centre. As a black young man he therefore understood that, even though many more young white men hung around the estate, he was particularly vulnerable.

Having the youth centre 'on the doorstep' made a big difference to how the young people saw both it and Helen. When she first started to work at the centre there was a core group of young people of Caribbean origin. Whether because she was a youth worker, an authority person, white, female, maybe a mixture of all of these, they wouldn't acknowledge her, wouldn't even make eye contact. They would walk past her as if she wasn't there, was of no significance. This was their way of 'owning' the centre, of making clear who mattered. Over the years this had changed as relationships and trust grew. And, with the change,

3. Twelve youth work stories



3. Twelve youth work stories



a mediation role developed in their relationships – with institutions such as schools and the police, with other young people and with their families.

By chance, that weekend Helen was visiting Jack, a young man from Greenville who she'd kept contact with after he'd been sent to prison. Jack had energy, charisma and a sharp intelligence which didn't take too many prisoners – but which had made a prisoner of him. Though the 'street' had quickly recognised this intelligence, his experience of schooling was one of struggle on which all sides had given up fairly quickly. On the visit, without naming names, Helen discussed with Jack her encounters with Adam, which led him to suggest that he write an open letter to the young people at the youth centre, telling them what it was like in a prison. Jack's letter duly arrived a couple of weeks later.

Helen told the young people about the letter, suggesting they think about and respond to what Jack had written about life in prison – about not seeing your family; wondering how they were but not being able to help or support them; watching people who you had thought of as friends slip away, leaving only a few who genuinely cared. He explained, too, how it meant having every letter read by a stranger before it reached you; using the toilet as the other prisoner who shared your cell ate his meal - or vice versa; being naked in front of prison guards. The letter described the repetitiveness of each day, having to keep a front with everyone around you preserving their boundaries and themselves, all the time signalling where nobody could tread. In all this, Category C prisons were the most dangerous because, whatever the other prisoners' offence, it was big.

Some young people were sympathetic to Jack's account; for others it was just a matter of – 'if you do the crime then you do the time'. However, both sets of reactions generated questions they wanted to put to Jack, demonstrating that this was a topic that meant something to them and which touched strong positions, emotions and memories. One young woman, Martha, who had kept a hostile distance from Helen for as long as Helen could remember, was particularly affected and left the discussion suddenly to go to the toilets. When Helen followed her it was clear that her hostility to her hadn't subsided – expressed in the question: "What would you know as a white woman?" This time however a shift occurred as Helen's relationship with Jack and her conversations with the others had challenged Martha's stereotyped view of her.

Eventually Martha talked of the impact on her of seeing her brother beaten up by the police when she was a child. That violence had left emotional scars - and the violence of knife crime had brought those feelings back. In her eyes it was all violence, all of it the same, the uniform not justifying any of it. When Helen was challenged by Martha on how she was affected by this issue, Helen explained that she believes everyone in society is affected by the issue, whether or not they live 'on the front line'.

Shortly afterwards, all these conversations took on an even greater emotive charge – and the work a heightened urgency - when a young man was murdered with a knife by another young man. Both had strong links to Greenville. As a way of giving the young people affected somewhere to be, the youth workers opened the youth centre on Sundays – so they could

explore what they were feeling and respond to what had happened.

The latest murder added a new poignancy to the questions the young people wanted to ask Jack - about his family, his feelings about the people he'd hurt, what he would have done differently and, most astutely, what would have needed to be there for him to have acted differently. For confidentiality reasons it wasn't possible to put the questions to him personally. So Helen wrote to a number of local prisons and youth offending services asking if the young people could put the questions to some of their prisoners. One Deputy Governor expressed interest in the project, partly because, he confided later, his wife had grown up in Greenville.

It became clear that discussing the issues raised by the questions was difficult for the young people

to do in the first person – they were too close both to the young person who had been murdered and the young person who had been charged with his murder. Out of their conversations, an idea for a film emerged which the young people would script and act in with the support of a professional script writer and film maker paid for by the local authority. Even though the prison was supportive, the process of getting access to and filming the prisoners was lengthy and complicated, needing Helen to, in effect, act as their administrator. Eventually however the youth workers met the prisoners, they posed the young people's questions to the prisoners, were filmed and this became part of their film. At no time did any young people from the centre come into contact with any of the offenders.

Based on the young people's reactions to and feelings about the

most recent murder, a central focus for the film emerged: the impact of someone being stabbed on those around them, on all those whose lives would never be the same again. This very process provided some catharsis for the young people as their emotions were acted out and their feelings put into words and actions. It was therefore never mainly an exercise in learning drama, film making, editing, acting or writing - though learning about all of these did happen. Though these proved important vehicles they were never ends in themselves – as for example accreditation targets would have made them. None of the young people got a certificate even though for many of them who had been expelled from school that would have been a first.

The film itself centres on a young man involved in a knife crime and the impact of this on his family. The words of the mother are the

3. Twelve youth work stories



actual words of Jack's mother, the young prisoner who wrote the open letter. She tells how it feels to have that empty place at the table and her struggle to deal with the stigma of having a son in prison, her lost dreams and hopes for her child. It is a powerful message of loss and grief. The youth workers took great care to use the evidence of the mother and to incorporate it accurately, constantly seeking to strike a balance between

3. Twelve youth work stories

compassion for the victim and his family and sympathy for the family of the attacker. Jack's mum's words are used over footage of the prison cell and visiting room.

Although for youth workers what was always most important was the process of making the film, its release is to be celebrated by the youth centre in a big way. A private cinema will be hired and the young people who acted in the film will be chauffeured to the event and appropriate evening wear hired. The film will then be distributed to Youth Offending Teams and other youth centres. Jack has been further involved in creating music for the film.

All this activity and its 'outcome', flowing from that one observation in the park, would have been impossible to predict. It wasn't in the youth centre's business plan – though the work certainly became

visible through its relevance in the community. In the process the youth centre took on a significance which wasn't easy to detect from a distance- something especially true of a neighbourhood like Greenville which is physically on the periphery of the town and many of whose young people are themselves on the periphery. In this sense the youth centre is the community's last nerve ending. Close it and you lose the feel for what's going on the edges of your society - which was precisely what was being proposed while this story was unfolding.

Pen and paper youth work



Anne was fifteen. On this particular evening she looked subdued and withdrawn, making little contact with the other young people. Something was clearly affecting her but her shrug suggested that she did not want to talk. It was a dismissal of both Grace (the youth worker) and the topic.

During the evening Grace created an opportunity for sitting next to Anne. Rather than talking, she passed her a note asking if she was ok. Anne responded by writing a note back saying she was feeling down, things were not all well at home – that she was really struggling. She signed the note with a sad face ☹. Through a series of small points of clarification in the notes that followed Anne, bit by bit, was able to reveal her struggles. Open questions were avoided or ignored by Anne who was too 'sussed' for that: she saw them as disrespectful, an insult to her intelligence. For Anne the problems were too big to bring out in one go.

Though it wasn't emotionally and physically possible to do that, the small pieces of clarification that Grace asked for seemed to be respected and responded to. Grace used the clarifications to show she was interested, that she cared and –

both as a youth worker but also as a parent herself – that maybe she even understood a little of what was happening to Anne. When it became clear that her relationship with her mother and father was strained, one of Grace's responses was that she was a mother as well and that as a parent she didn't always get it right.

As the exchanges of notes continued other worries came out – about the pressure to have a boyfriend and how she felt about herself. All this took place without a spoken word between the two of them. At the end of the evening Grace wrote another note asking Anne how she was feeling. Her response was to draw a straight face an improvement on the sad one where she'd started.

No more was thought or said about this exchange. Though infrequently, Anne continued to visit the centre,

then eventually stopped coming altogether and contact was lost.

A couple of years later Anne saw Grace in the town centre. She approached her smiling, asked how she was and about the youth centre. She was studying in College and enjoying the course. Anne asked whether Grace remembered their exchange of notes, to which Grace replied that of course she did. Anne thought for a moment and then, looking directly at Grace, said that on that evening she was feeling so low that she was thinking of self harming but that their 'conversation' had stopped her. She then said thank you, and 'seeya'.

The power of graffiti: Detached youth work in a town centre 'hot spot'



Even though a lot of adults were drinking in the town centre, complaints to the council were mainly about young people. Though they got on well together, even sometimes with as many as seventy five of them gathering there, they

3. Twelve youth work stories



were constantly being moved on and threatened with ASBOs. The police assumed they were all from one area though it turned out that they actually came from all over the town.

Prompted by police evidence of 'anti-social behaviour' incidents over one summer month, the Youth Service's street-based team of youth workers was called in by a referral from the anti-social behaviour team, the police and the council. Some conversations with the young people opened up because some of them knew some of the youth workers from their estates; others however had never met any of them before. The workers were aware of not overstaying their welcome – starting from the position that they were guests in the young people's space and that it was a privilege that young people let them come into it. As at first there was a bit

3. Twelve youth work stories

of a barrier, they needed to work consciously to find common ground.

Over a couple of weeks the youth workers began to get to know the young people, working to build a climate where they might be willing to engage more personally with them. For one week they just sat with them in the church yard, focusing on them, listening to what they had to say. As one of the youth workers commented: 'You have two ears and one mouth. Use them in that proportion'.

As part of these conversations, over 100 young people were asked why they came to the town centre and what they and other young people liked and didn't like about it. The youth workers also gave out leaflets informing young people of their stop-and-search rights as well as information on drugs, including alcohol which was easily available to the young people.

In response to the questions, many of the young people said they were there simply to meet their friends and to socialise. When asked directly what they would like to do, the response of one young person was: 'You're the only people who've ever actually asked us that'. They said they were sick of sitting in the church yard and would like somewhere to go – like a drop-in. As one young person suggested doing a graffiti workshop, the youth workers brought in a graffiti artist – also a youth worker - who offered a workshop in the town centre. On the first day he practised graffiti techniques with the young people, persuading them that they could draw and that it was OK to make mistakes. The workshop was designed to allow all the young people to develop - not just 'the best'.

The actual graffiti – pictures on boards – told the story of why the



young people came to the town centre. Questions were added - such as why were young people being ignored – which were then presented to councillors. Though it took time to get a response, with the support of their manager the youth workers eventually took over a town centre office from 4-9pm on Saturdays, setting up a drop-in which attracted up to seventy five young people. The young people

asked for trips and computer games and did a Halloween project.

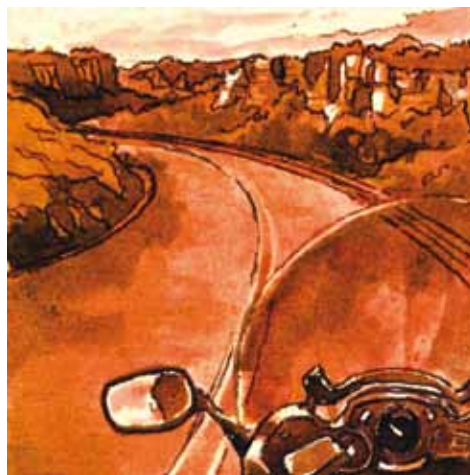
As some of the young people didn't want to come into the building where the drop-in was being run, one of the youth workers - a young woman volunteer - went to them to find out what might get them involved. They talked more easily to her, saying they wanted something that was bigger and had pool tables. Other town centre premises were then opened up which also had media workshop space. However, conversations with young people not using the drop-in remained an on-going part of the process. Though the youth workers never saw themselves as 'controllers' or 'enforcers', the police were pleased with the drop-in and, as anti-social behaviour reduced, impressed by the impact of the work. When they first stopped by to have a cup of chocolate, the young people wanted to leave. Having been persuaded

to stay, they then challenged the police – for example on their use of terms such as ‘undesirables’.

The project was seen as having a number of other different outcomes – some intended, some unintended, with different agencies recognising and valuing different impacts. It was not however easy to provide recorded outcomes of a key element of the project – the conversations between the young people and the youth workers.

The young people from the Town Centre are about to be involved in meeting Councillors, the police and the Anti-Social Behaviour Team to produce a Town Youth Strategy. This will be aimed at young people with an interest in skateboarding and BMX riding, with the focus of provision being opened up for these young people in the town centre.

Getting accredited: Youth work as a virtual trip ‘down under’



Barry, the youth worker, first met George when he was 15 or 16 at a ‘last chance saloon’ alternative education centre. George – a very angry and frustrated young man – had already been through ‘the system’, including being excluded

from a pupil referral unit (PRU). He didn’t get along with his step father and had poor communication skills. All this, including his violent behaviour, had at times spilled over into school life.

The staff at the centre – all tutors or teachers – were finding it difficult to work with him. As they had a good relationship with the Youth Service, they asked them if there was a younger man who might be able to build up a relationship with George.

Barry, who was employed by the Youth Service, worked with George intensively three afternoons a week for a month. The centre made it clear that they still wanted George to get his qualifications. However, though some of the staff were initially sceptical about the whole arrangement, Barry was given a free hand on how he developed the work.

3. Twelve youth work stories



Starting from George’s interest in motorbikes, Barry supported him in planning an imaginary motorbike ride across Australia. To be sure he didn’t set George up to fail, he set realistic goals and agreed targets and boundaries with him for their work together. George, who had never been given this kind of choice before, liked the voluntary nature of his participation in the project and having ownership of what he was doing. This showed in his changed behaviour – he seemed calmer, more willing to be involved and (for him!) he asked his questions politely. He also appeared genuinely enthusiastic about making choices based on his agenda even though this was ultimately the school’s agenda focused on getting him to engage and achieve.

For his part Barry, while trying to build in a fun element to the sessions, went into them organised but also prepared, without ‘blagging

3. Twelve youth work stories

it', to draw on his improvisational skills as a youth worker.

By asking open-ended questions, over the course of the project Barry was able to help George price up the 'virtual' journey (petrol, food, clothing, tariffs). He did this by encouraging him to carry out the necessary research - by using the internet, visiting bike shops, going to the library. He also discussed with him how to act (and be polite) in particular situations and with different kinds of people – for example, in a conversations on the phone and in a shop, by making eye contact and speaking clearly. Once a more trusting relationship had started to build, Barry would jokingly give George a mark out of ten for how he'd handled a particular exchange.

The project's setting had its constraints – for example the one and a half hour periods – and Barry

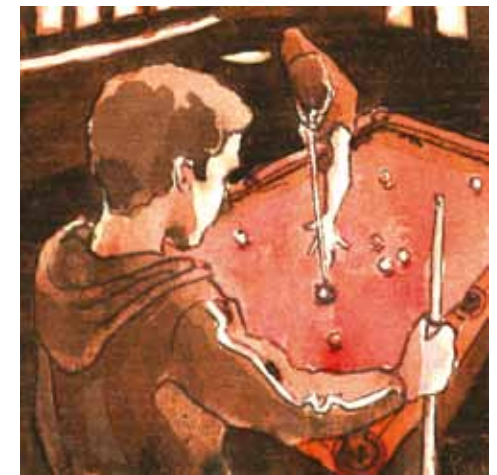
needed to keep in mind that he had responsibilities to the organisation within which he was working.

Nonetheless, the sessions provided a space for George and Barry to get to know each other and so for this relationship to develop. As George became more relaxed, his manner changed. He became more polite to the worker and to others and more trusting and open in what he would tell Barry, including about his home and family life. All this seemed to be helped by Barry being male and younger than most of the other staff. Also Barry didn't look like a teacher – he usually wore a tracksuit – and so was also able to avoid displaying his power and authority too obviously. Barry also contributed to this build-up of trust by giving George the time he needed to gain confidence in the relationship and by staying consistent – by for example keeping promises to bring material such as

a bike magazine to a session.

Using humour and enquiry, the worker also drew on this pool of trust to challenge George's beliefs and behaviour– for example his sexism and racism and his tendency to push boundaries. In this the worker had at times to be pro-active, using the opportunities provided by the openness of the educational programme to explore situations and issues as they happened. While researching 'Virtual Oz' for example, George indicated that he wanted to look at aboriginal sites to find out more about their culture – their paintings, their traditional weapons, the didgeridoo, etc. Later in the session, without relating this to the early discussion, he made a racist comment about a Pakistani family who owned a local shop. This gave Barry an opportunity to challenge him very directly, initiating an in-depth discussion which, though

unlikely to have changed George's underlying attitudes, seemed to plant a seed.



At the same time Barry by acknowledging he was part of a two way process in which he was also learning from George and growing through the experience, helped to empower George and give him a sense of ownership and appropriate control. By showing

he was open and that it's alright to make mistakes, he also sought to model alternative ways of behaving. Thus, because Barry knew nothing about motorbikes, he made mistakes – sometimes on purpose. As this allowed George to pick him up on these, he came to feel that the relationship wasn't just weighted in Barry's favour. George also appreciated that he was able to teach Barry things and that Barry was responsive to this.

Although George had a reputation for disengaging and becoming aggressive if he didn't get his own way, he was also able to take knockbacks during the project. When for example late on a teacher challenged him over not having worked out the price of petrol for his journey correctly, he factored in the new costs and made a better choice on his travel options.

By the time he left the centre via the project George had achieved accreditations in maths, geography, computer skills, english and life skills. He went on to college to take a course in mechanics and, having negotiated the complex process of dependence via independence to interdependence, ten years later continues to have a relationship with the Youth Service, the PRU and the education centre.



Casual – or informal? Coffee bar careers advice

Two people are leaning against the counter of a youth club coffee bar – one a man in his thirties, a part-time youth worker; the other a young man in his mid-teens.

Hesitantly the youth worker starts a conversation by introducing himself. This continues fitfully, self-consciously, until the youth worker asks the young man if he's still at school. He left the previous summer, he says, and is now working in an office. He makes it very clear he isn't much enjoying the job. 'How come you're doing it then?' 'It was my dad's idea. I wanted to stay on at school and do GCSEs'.

The young man lingers for a few moments longer, the conversation all but petering out. As he turns

3. Twelve youth work stories



away to join his friends, matter-of-factly the youth worker says: 'You know you can go back to college and do GCSEs?' The young man stops briefly, registers the information, asks how he can find out more. The worker suggests contacting a local careers office.

The two do not meet again for many years. When they do, the young man, no longer so young, remembers the incident vividly. He now is a qualified youth worker, has a PhD and is working as a university lecturer.

3. Twelve youth work stories

Beyond aggression to eye contact: Struggling for trust in a city centre drop-in



At first glance the youth work setting seemed ideal – a town centre ‘drop-in’ housed in a characterful, rambling old commercial building funded by the so-called ‘riot money’ of the early 1980’s. But from the outset

the project was surrounded by tension. Situated in a multi-racial city its core group of intimidating ‘skinheads’ provoked anger and suspicion. Many politicians and indeed youth workers felt that the Council should not be supporting work with ‘racist’ young people.

Indeed the contradictions were being experienced keenly within the staff team of three full-timers and six sessional workers, the latter employed in theory to provide structured workshops to the Centre’s users. All the full-time staff were women and found themselves at odds about how to relate to their audience of social outcasts, almost all of whom travelled in from the same nearby council estate. Aged between 17 and 25, they were all unemployed, all shared a competitive obsession with tattoos, whilst several were in and out of custody on a recurring basis. Whilst the co-ordinator and

one youth worker were committed to developing relationships with the core group within the one place which opened its doors to them, the other was on the edge of wanting to exclude them completely ...and to start afresh.

This argument would not go away. It revealed itself on a regular basis as the daily users, comprising about a dozen young men and half a dozen young women, two of whom brought their babies, displayed a contradictory cocktail of sexist and racist prejudice mixed with class solidarity. Whilst all three women workers would have described themselves as feminist, the two in the majority believed that confrontation with the group would be counter-productive. In the jargon we used at the time they favoured ‘critical dialogue’. The worker in the minority felt that this approach failed to establish ground rules for acceptable behaviour.

And the problem for the majority position was that there appeared to be little in the way of critical dialogue. For weeks the young men and women remained sulky, surly and suspicious. They were on edge with one another, almost anticipating the authoritarian lecture that never came. The workers’ gentle advances and inoffensive questions were rebuffed. However, slowly, the wall of antagonism began to crumble. Increasingly the co-ordinator’s office became a fulcrum of the Centre’s activity, especially as key members of the group wanted to learn how to use the typewriter, the photocopier, the fax machine. Desiring to do so forced them to put aside their aloof ‘we don’t need help from anybody’ stance. The workers’ commitment to taking their requests for assistance seriously and trusting them with the equipment was met by a lessening of the tension, an unexpected smile,

the exchange of joking remarks and genuine eye contact. Through this process the office became the place where everyone congregated to swap news and gossip.

Bit by bit the workers were accepted into the group's life, learning slowly about the young people as individuals. In exploring more of the personal and social a pattern emerged, wherein a worker's willingness to take the initiative in talking about their own experiences, say around school or relations within the family, was mirrored by a young person opening up about their own history. As an example one of the staff had worked, unknown to her parents, in the cloakroom at an infamous all-night Northern Soul club. Several of the young people were amazed at such dubious behaviour and were drawn into sharing some of their clandestine activity. It helped too that members of the

band were interested in the music itself and old records were dug out and played. Another opening was provided as well by the young people's mocking the strong northern accent of the co-ordinator, which led to a long-running argument about stereotypes.



Gradually the group began to use some of the workshop options, which had been rejected as being too much like the school they had

hated. All was not plain sailing though. In an effort to breathe life into the cookery class, it was agreed to eat together collectively once a week on Tuesday afternoons.

The perennial favourite meal was mash and beans despite efforts to introduce other dishes. But the meals were to provide some very positive moments, within which discussions suddenly took off – about racism, about violence, about youth unemployment. However disaster struck, after a particularly heated argument about sexism when one of the workers exclaimed “that was great, what should we discuss next week?”. A deathly silence ensued. Later some of them asked, ‘what did she mean ‘discuss’?. We were just chatting, having a laugh and a row’. The last thing this volatile and proud group wanted was to be worked on rather than with, to feel that they were being cornered and manipulated.

3. Twelve youth work stories



For what seemed an eternity they withdrew their good will. Ironically the incident led to the worker involved leaving the project, to be replaced by a young man, who became affectionately known later as ‘Hippie Steve’. His arrival meant that the workers were much more in accord about their commitment to a creative process which could not be scripted in advance.

Thus despite the setbacks, the atmosphere in the centre grew more welcoming, more trusting and reflected too the needs and desires of the skinheads themselves. The photography workshop was taken up as an opportunity to experiment with their self-image and to produce publicity for a fledgling band. The shoe-making workshop, initially dismissed as ‘hippie sandal-making crap’ translated into an opportunity to personalise and/or repair their ubiquitous ‘Doc Martens’.

3. Twelve youth work stories

To an extent the group's members took more control over the centre itself. One of the leading lights, very much a hard man in appearance, became the building's paid cleaner, carrying out his duties with his young baby in tow. Painting and small DIY tasks were undertaken. Whilst still something of a ghetto, the centre was perceived as less threatening to outsiders and more challenging to its insiders than its critics had expected

How much progress was made remains an elusive question. All the more so as the project's existence and philosophy were undermined by its dependence on short-term funding and hence discontinuity in terms of relationships. With time and money running out two of the main members of the team left for other parts of the country. Whilst the young people shrugged their shoulders with only a nodding, but telling flicker of emotion,



all involved were mindful that a particular set of circumstances created collectively, through thick and thin, was disappearing. The youth work process needs the freedom to breathe and the space to grow. Too often this crucial need is not given its due. In this sense we will never know what might have unfolded if the process and relations had continued for longer.

Beyond stereotype and prejudice: Developing youth work with traveller young women

Kimberly was aware of a traveller campsite about five minutes walk from the youth centre where she worked. Though she had been in her post for a number of years she had never seen or met any of the young people from the site. This was not good enough for her since, as a youth worker she believed that she needed to be proactive in establishing contact.

Kimberly knew nothing about travellers other than what she had come across in the media, which was overwhelmingly negative. Attempts to contact appropriate agencies locally for information proved fruitless. After six months still without contact, she attended a training course on 'Traveller

and Gypsy Communities'. Rather than hearing from the travellers themselves, the day consisted mostly of one professional speaker after another talking about **their** experiences of working with these communities. The discussions seemed to focus on the problems they faced, without acknowledging how racism impacted on areas such as health and literacy. She had particularly wanted to hear from the travellers themselves about their culture and what gave them the strength to maintain their identity and way of life.

During the morning she became aware of a group of women who appeared to be travellers and who from their expressions, like her, seemed somewhat uncomfortable. At lunch time she went to sit with them and asked what they thought of the day. They agreed that it should have been led by people from the traveller communities

3. Twelve youth work stories



and should have had more focus on their positive attributes. The conversation also revealed a very different picture from the morning session as, with changing times hitting these communities hard, they seemed to be having to fight to preserve these positives in their culture. Though Kimberly sensed their frustrations and their vulnerability to forces that wanted both to know and to change them, their pride in their strong values and traditions came across strongly.

Kimberly learnt a number of important things from the final session when the travellers themselves spoke and answered questions: that travellers and gypsies are different and that there are thousands of cultures rather than a collective stereotype; that therefore every site had different values so that she could only learn from the local people about their culture; and that she would

have to prove the integrity of her intent - that she was not coming to tell them or to treat their young people as problems. She also had it confirmed that she would need to be introduced appropriately by someone who was trusted by the group, in particular to the women in charge of 'educational' matters.

As the boys had more freedom to leave the site and were involved in a number of activities already, she concluded that a young women's group might work for the girls aged 11-16.

She also had to deal with warning comments such as: 'Not even some of the police will go on the site'; and 'I wouldn't bother, their parents will disrupt their attendance'. However it was important to her to find out for herself who these young people were and what was 'really' going on for them.

It was difficult for Kimberly to get in contact with the group because she needed to have a relationship with somebody who was trusted by the travellers, who could vouch for and introduce her. This took about a year of negotiating a series of 'someone-who-knows-someone' contacts before Kimberly was invited to meet the women from the site. When she did get to meet them they were keen to welcome her and explain to her about their culture and their relationships with their daughters.

Kimberly followed the lead of the women in working out the kind of questions that she could ask respectfully and without offence. She wanted to know enough to help her to work with the young people's culture and how to demonstrate that respect, as mutual respect was key to the group's success. The warmth and openness of their welcome for her was in stark

contrast to the warnings she'd had and she felt a connection to these women and their children.

As the women clearly so prioritised being part of a wider family unit, the children had many loving and watchful elders to look out for them - explained as: 'We don't let the aprons strings out too far'. Their responses also revealed a real concern and an ambition for their daughters including wanting them to have safe opportunities for nurturing their togetherness. This was a powerful value in their community. But their experience of the world was not always as a place that was safe or welcoming but of vulnerability and anxiety handed down from generation to generation - a response both to this vulnerability and typical of close knit communities.

One of the women who was overwhelmingly supportive

3. Twelve youth work stories

believed that the young women should be encouraged to become more confident in the face of the negative stereotypes of travellers which they met in the schools and in society generally. As the women shared their life stories, Kimberly shared some of her own – particularly problems with literacy which had undermined her own confidence as a young person and left her feeling that she didn't fit in. These exchanges helped her empathise with the young women and motivated her to offer activities to them which were fun and would build confidence.

She sensed some nervousness that as a non-traveller she would be taking on a position of trust within the community. Kimberly understood that due to a need for self preservation non-travellers were given a second chance if something went wrong but following that if something were

to happen again, trust would be difficult to maintain and the contact would end.

Kimberly suggested the young women come to the centre weekly for a trial period of three months. She offered to meet the mothers after that to get their feedback and gave them her mobile number so they could speak to her directly about any immediate worries.

In the build up to the first session, Kimberly and her co-worker acknowledged that they were very apprehensive, their expectations still effected by the media's negative stereotypes of traveller communities. This helped her to realise how powerful these stereotypes were despite the warmth and the trust displayed to her by this traveller community which had done so much to contradict these stereotypes. In the event, from the moment they



arrived, the young women brought huge enthusiasm to sessions. Small comments could nonetheless reveal how vulnerable the young women felt – as when one of them challenged: 'So are you going to tell us that we are 'pikies' and to fuck off?' Though said quietly, this suggested a level of anxiety within the group, which at times left the workers feeling that the genuineness of their respect for

the young women and their culture was being tested. However over time the young women seemed reassured about the workers' integrity and value base so that when for example they had pointed out to them the need for the same respect for other groups which they expected for themselves, they were quick to respond.

They arrived at the sessions en masse, a strong and confident group who brought great energy to the centre. As the staff got to know them and as they got to know the staff they emerged as young women with very striking personalities who enjoyed each other's company and responded to the challenges posed by the activities. However, because they had a tendency to talk over each other, the workers introduced 'listening' and 'hearing' games aimed at refining their communication skills within the group.

3. Twelve youth work stories



What also became clear was that because at home someone was always near enough to offer help, outside their community the young women were liable very quickly to look for support from others before attempting a new task. Because this wasn't necessarily available in the centre, they could at times appear nervous about trying new activities. When baking for example, the workers decided they needed to go through the process twice so that, second time around, the young women felt confident enough to measure and mix the ingredients and complete the task on their own. Eating together was anyway an important activity in its own right at the centre, so that the young women would bring food to cook and share with the whole group some of which, the workers made sure, was always taken home.

Getting the paperwork completed was more of a problem. Letters and

forms were often distrusted and papers sent home experienced as institutional intrusion. Text messages and phone calls were therefore important for keeping in touch and following up administrative matters. Kimberly would also ask parents to sign as and when they came into the centre, recognising that it was the relationship and the personal contact which made the difference.

Though consistency was throughout seen as vital, flexibility needed to run alongside this. On an evening when only one of the girls could attend, for example, she agreed that four of the boys from the community could take part. This turned out to be the session at which Kimberly learnt even more about the racism and discrimination which these young people experienced in their everyday lives.

A potential dilemma for the

workers through all this was: what if the young women wanted to have conversations which would not have been approved by the mothers' group? However, because, it seemed, they had other trusted adults in their lives to speak to, this in fact did not turn out to be a problem. If issues did arise Kimberly would look for ways of supporting the young women which remained respectful to their families. As most of the time it was she who was asking the questions, they seemed over the weeks to accept her commitment to them as genuine and so were able to share more about their culture with her.

As one of the mothers would call in at the end of most of the sessions to hear what the group had been up to and give Kimberley feedback, including from the young women, the three month review meeting turned out not to be needed. In fact there were enough positive feelings

about the project for the boys on the site to start asking when it would be their turn to come the centre!

After it had been running for some months, a new staff member joined the group. As always happened, the young women were asked to introduce themselves and say something about who they were. Eventually, it was the turn of the young woman who weeks earlier had posed the workers with the 'pikie' challenge. Boldly she announced: 'I'm a Traveller - and Proud!' - a response which Kimberley read as a non-accredited 'outcome' indicating the level of confidence which by then existed between the workers and the young women.

3. Twelve youth work stories

‘I wouldn’t be the person I am today’: One young man on why young people need youth clubs



Ashbury youth club was a big part of me whilst being aged 13-18. It kept me safe and ... from getting myself and my friends into trouble. But it wasn’t all about being kept off the streets. At the age that we

were we didn’t care about anything and found it hard to communicate with parents and teachers. When it felt like the whole world shut you out there was always Jenny that you could just go to talk about anything in the world and she would be most understanding and give you the best advice any could give. A lot of people called her their second mum (she was to me).

There was always the educational side of being at a youth club too - learning things we really didn’t get to learn about at school and being able to do projects with other people and learning how to really work as a team ... also Jenny actually tried to get us youth and the police to co-operate – to get us to see eye to eye with them.

A lot of time it didn’t work but it was still good to see the real side of the police specially at the age we was at because, lets face it, everyone liked

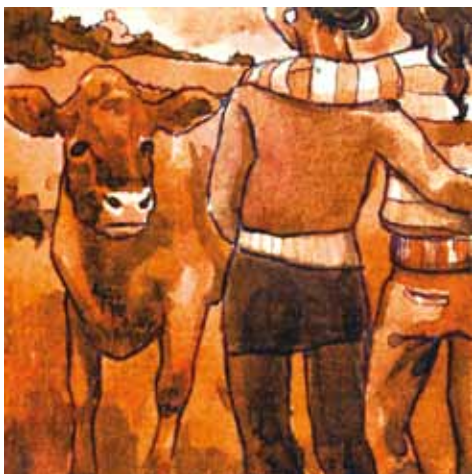
a police chase. Jenny even made a effort to go on patrol on the streets with the police to actually see what people actually did do when the youth centre wasn’t open for us to go to. Luckily she never found us in our hiding places but she did tell us what funny things happened while she was out like a police man having to jump up a huge wall. She told us she just couldn’t stop laughing at him haha.

But it wasn’t just to do with the police and keeping us out of trouble. It was everything – family problems, pregnancies, school issues, friend problems and a lot more to be honest. Every teenager needs someone like Jenny to go to because having someone like her really helps with life. She helped me and my friends out with so many things.

This is why we need to keep all the youth centres open so people like

I was and others ... have someone that really understands the youth because I know if I didn’t have someone like Jenny I wouldn’t be the person I am today!!

A modest journey in self-discovery: Reflections on a mentoring 'resi'



Leoni: We went to Yorkshire for the resi. It was in the middle of nowhere really, like a field of cows, that's what was good because you're away from the rest of the world – a whole weekend devoted to you.

Judy: We learnt how you would cope in different situations. And sometimes the way you cope can affect others...

And sometimes you think – I don't agree with that, but when it came down to it you saw people being honest. That was good because, though sometimes you don't think you do, when you're in a situation with a young person your morals do actually come out more. People showed them more on the resi because they didn't feel pressured when they weren't in school, didn't feel the peer pressure.

Leoni: You were like an influence as well on people. And if you're an influence on people your age then you're definitely going to have an impact on someone who's younger than you especially if they're coming to you for help. And it (the residential) just gave

everyone a better awareness of their personalities and what they actually did like and didn't like as people in general

Jenny: As well, we learnt about young people and the problems they may talk to you about as a peer mentor... you get to see (them) from a different perspective. You know you go in there and you think you know it all, well I did. And then later on my perspective totally changed from what I thought anyway.

Leoni: It was fun doing it as well. In my group, it was a total variation. We didn't know the people in the upper sixth that came with us. People you'd seen in the corridor and you'd never met – you got stuck with them to play the body game where you've got to put your body parts together. It was like "Oh my God get your hands away from me!"
Laughter

3. Twelve youth work stories



Jenny: When we went on the residential I didn't really know anybody – I didn't know any of the other sixth formers. So I was a bit like – I don't know what to say to people. They did ice breakers, like the body to body game... But then after a couple of hours, we were all just sound with each other. So it improved my social skills a lot. I find I can communicate with people a lot better...

The residential makes it obvious what qualities you've got as a person and that they are important. And that everyone else has individual qualities – it's not just that everyone's the same. You as a person should keep hold of that.

Leoni: But then at the end of the residential everyone was just mates.

3. Twelve youth work stories

Surviving, learning and growing: The youth centre as sanctuary



Most of my adolescent life was spent living with a parent who was battling alcoholism. I still feel a great deal of love for them and see them as having given it their best in the struggles they faced in life. However, because they often

couldn't carry out ordinary everyday tasks, from a young age I ran the household, managing the money and doing the shopping. This made me a prime candidate for the attention of many of the agencies which are now part of Integrated Youth Support Services (IYSS).

As my attendance at school rapidly went downhill, one of these was education welfare. At that time my education was the last thing on my mind. At the age of 14, I was much more preoccupied with the upkeep of the family home – and just dealing with my parent's addiction. This was never picked up by the education welfare officers, and I never told them about it or anyone else. I even went to great lengths to hide it from the rest of my family.

Later, as I got involved in what today would probably be called 'anti-social behaviour', I came into contact with the police. As

I continued to hide the reality of my home situation, the role of 'appropriate adult' at my many police interviews was taken by a duty social worker or another family member. I often felt pressure from these adult authority figures as they tried to get me do something I wasn't ready for or simply didn't want to do – I simply didn't trust them. Looking back I realise I had chosen to live in my own secretive world, outside all official surveillance, data recording and information-sharing. I also now understand my truancy as a coping strategy, particularly for dealing with being bullied at school.

It was at about this time that I had my first encounter with the youth work detached team. With a group of friends, I was setting newspaper alight on the local football pitch. The workers said hello, showed their identification badges and tried to tackle our fire.

Our response was one of great amusement – before running off laughing, we asked them if they were weirdoes wanting to talk to kids. But they kept coming back and eventually invited me to attend the local youth centre. Though I was reluctant – apprehensive – I agreed. On one occasion I went to a health workshop where, as well as having a health check, I was tempted mainly by the offer of fruit cocktails.

Though I never disclosed the reality of my home life until much later when I felt ready, the youth centre provided a calm and welcoming space away from the negative distractions of my home life. The walls were covered with sexual health and alcohol awareness posters and in the middle of the room there was a round table where I would often find myself sitting. As well as giving me access to a range of positive adult role models – members of the staff team – I shared

3. Twelve youth work stories



many happy times with friends and the centre staff on outings to the beach, football tournaments, bike rides. These activities may seem very basic to outsiders and can often be taken for granted. But they always made me feel welcome as well as giving me opportunities I wasn't likely get at home. For me they were about much more than, just taking a bunch of naughty kids to the beach and getting them a bag of chips. It was on these trips that my relationship with the youth centre and the staff developed so that at critical moments in my life I was confident enough to go to the centre and ask for help.

Nor were these critical moments restricted to the youth centre. This youth work delivered within a defined territory. The youth centre itself was just an office on the main street which from the outside looked no different from the numerous take-aways and

second hand shops it sat alongside. I was anyway as likely to meet the workers on detached work or at the local shop or local café where, out of their own pocket, they would often treat me to a bag of chips. It's not my intention to be critical of other agencies that were involved in my life – only to highlight how important it was for an organisation to show an interest in my life even while I was taking part in enjoyable recreational activities.

As the date of my GCSEs approached I was still finding it difficult at home and was beginning to get anxious about what grades I would get. As home was not a suitable place to revise, the centre let me use a room which came with friendly staff support. I then enrolled with a training provider and from there went on to an apprenticeship and a full time job for which the senior worker of the centre gave me a reference. I

continued to visit the staff at the centre regularly as I was finding the transition to full time employment difficult. This was due mainly to peer pressure as a lot of my friends were becoming more involved in criminal activity. When I disclosed to the staff at the centre that I was finding it difficult not to become involved, they urged me to keep my focus because I had by then come too far to go back to my previous lifestyle. I know now that the staff were trying to raise my sense of achievement; for me at the time it also gave me renewed hope that I was doing the right thing.

By then the consequences of their law breaking for some of my friends were beginning to show, with some having to attend Youth Offending Team sessions or being threatened with court appearances and prison. I asked staff at the centre to organise a trip like the ones we'd been on in the past – to

a football tournament or a bike ride. Their reaction was that if a trip was to be organised, we'd have to organise it ourselves – and behave appropriately. Though the trip never happened, it made me realise that the centre was open to giving anyone a chance as long as they did their best, no matter how little.

When I was eighteen I had a family bereavement which affected my life badly. Again, the staff at the centre provided a sanctuary. Though they all expressed their condolences, the most influential memory I took from this experience was of a youth worker who talked about their own loss of a family member at a similar age. Even though the process of grieving was vast and complex, that one conversation made the world a better place just by my helping me realise that someone else had been in a similar situation. I was due to go on my first ever holiday that month but was now struggling



3. Twelve youth work stories

to find the spending money as I had paid for the funeral costs. The centre staff organised a collection and donated it to me.

After returning from holiday I popped into the centre one day after work at a local factory as the detached team were preparing to go out. As they always did, they gave me what ever time they could, asking how work was going and just showing a general interest. It was then I asked the question which has had a fundamental impact on the rest of my life.

“How do you do this? What you do?”

What I was asking was: how do I become a youth worker? The staff then supported me in applying for and getting a place on a local entry level youth work course. At the induction evening I was incredibly nervous and quiet, just trying to find my feet as the youngest person

in the group. Then there was a knock on the door and the detached team squeezed their heads round it and gave me a wave of support before being shuffled to the exit by course tutors not too pleased at the session being interrupted! Still a fond memory. From this entry level course I went on to graduate from university with a youth work degree, became a youth worker and then enrolled on an MA course.

A conversation of note during my transition from young person to youth worker happened when two youth workers took me for a cup of tea in a café. Their advice was very clear: though I might observe other youth workers and even take on bits of their practice, as I had the skills to be a youth worker, I needed to be sure that I stayed ‘myself’. I, the clear message was, was good enough to do something worthwhile, and in my own right.

4. Practising

As far as possible, each of these 'stories' has sought to allow the practice described to tell its own story – about the two-steps-forward-one-step-back of its processes and (sometimes) about how it impacted on young people. All the workers involved have brought to it often long experience, much background knowledge and a great deal of internalised skill. These are all likely to have been rooted in a training which, as well as improving 'technical competence', emphasised self-awareness and self-reflection – such as recognising their own apprehensions before taking on a challenging new piece of work.

These accounts have been included because they capture key features of the fundamentally **educational** processes of youth-work-in-action which IDYW and others have been struggling to defend. As was made clear in 'Setting the Scene', crucial

amongst these features are young people's choice to engage, starting points defined by their interests and concerns, and environments and activities which they continue substantially to shape – and **enjoy**. Because the young man concerned was required to attend, the one exception is the account of the work done within a pupil referral unit (PRU) – included particularly as a vivid example of how youth work skills can help move an 'excluded' young person from, at best, compliant attendance to motivated participation and some 'owned' (and, for him especially, highly valued) educational achievements.

Significantly, as well as demonstrating a continuing link with an institution and its workers, this is also one of the few stories which provides the kind of 'hard' evidence of an 'outcome' increasingly demanded by policy-makers – in this case in the form of

subject accreditations. Such valued gains from youth work are of course far from exceptional.

However, as this story also illustrates, these are often – indeed usually – more hidden or more subtle in their expression. Few of these narratives therefore add up to a straightforward success story with predictable measured outcomes – what, sceptically, one of the narrators looking back on his own time as a youth club member called 'community and youth work as the saviour'. Moreover, when feasible or acceptable 'direct delivery' is significantly determined by powerful external factors – the ending of the short-term funding for a drop-in centre used by skinheads; a decision by managers that a youth centre cannot contain a group of young women – then painstakingly developed processes with potentially valuable outcomes for young people and their





4. Practising

communities may anyway be aborted.

Even in more favourable conditions, however, no advance guarantees were possible that a piece of information on returning to education would even get picked up by the young man to whom it was offered, still less that it would open up a pathway to a higher degree. Or that support to a distressed young woman via a series of written notes would act as a protection against self-harming – an ‘outcome’ which anyway only emerged by accident two years later. Similarly, if more immediately, the group of girls causing havoc on the street of an estate did not instantly stop annoying residents, including other young people, just because detached workers got involved. And though youth work inputs continued over many months, even years, despite strongly affirmed

trust in the youth worker one of those young women still ended up in a custodial institution, a black young man was still repeatedly stopped and searched by the local police, some young people were still reluctant to use a newly opened Saturday night drop-in, and others, clearly sometimes up to no good, were still not willing to reveal their neighbourhood hiding places to the youth worker. Most starkly and tragically, even as a highly imaginative and challenging youth work project on carrying knives was under way, one young man was killed and another was in custody charged with his murder.

Running through the stories, however, are some repeating and inter-related themes which illuminate what helps make youth work **work**, what might count as an ‘outcome’ and how the practice might have helped achieve this. As they come together, these give

some reality to what one former ‘user’, now a youth worker himself, tentatively referred to as ‘the magic of youth work’ – for him, importantly, rooted in ‘a first engagement of humour’. Though none stands alone or makes ‘success’ inevitable, some of these ‘indicators’ are therefore worth capturing.

Which young people?

Individually or as a group, many of the young people featured in these stories entered their youth work encounters with a stigmatised and potentially discriminatory label attached to them: ‘Skinhead’, ‘Traveller’, ‘Black’, ‘school drop-out’, even ‘carer’. Nonetheless, the work with them proceeded on one basic but overriding premise: that that the youth worker’s task was to understand and treat them as young people, for who they were, here, now and, most often, within their chosen peer groupings. This

was true whether they were first met as part of a milling crowd in a city centre ‘hot spot’, or causing havoc on the streets of their estate, or on a playing field setting fires, or simply because they had chosen to use a town centre drop-in. Rarely was it achieved without a struggle – to for example escape media-imposed images, overcome workers’ own preconceptions and even prejudices, address colleagues’ doubts and contrary interpretations of what was needed. Nonetheless, the core commitment remained: to move past the generalisations attached to the label – ‘anti-social’, ‘wild’, ‘racist’, ‘sexist’ – in search of as fresh a perception of the young person carrying it as they could achieve.

However, as in many youth work situations, this struggle was often not without its contradictions. Rooted in their own experiences, values and aspirations, some of



these young people willingly, even proudly, embraced some of the labels – as ‘Black’, ‘Traveller’, ‘Skinhead’ – because in crucial ways these helped them define their self- and their wider communities and their cultural identity. As well as recognising the oppressive community and institutional rejection which the labels could attract, therefore, including from other young people, for some of workers another essential starting point was to demonstrate their awareness of the positive meanings of these identities for some of the young people they were meeting.

The setting

For enabling these young people to move from merely being present to genuine participation, the nature of setting was usually critical. In part this of course meant physical space, or spaces – youth club, an

old commercial building, streets of an estate, town centre square, local park, church yard, residential centre ‘in the middle of nowhere ...like a field of cows... away from the rest of the world’. For the young person this may have been a ‘defined territory’ to which youth workers were privileged to have access, acquiring a special significance even when (or perhaps because) it is ‘just an office on the main street’. These settings may have been part of a ‘local sense of space’ which, this same writer suggests, could be lost as youth workers move into large multi-purpose MyPlace buildings – or, in the backwash of Youth Service cuts, into amorphous ‘hubs’ serving wide geographical areas which some authorities are now introducing.

Youth work settings are important too, however, as social and cultural spaces which in powerful if still of course limited ways are young

people-owned. Crucial here is their definition by that ‘first engagement through humour’ – a built-in ‘fun element’ in environments as different as a mentoring training course in a remote residential centre and a teaching room within an urban PRU. Because these are also spaces within which young people can negotiate engagement at their own pace and according to their own levels of readiness, workers must also, as one worker put it, ‘wait for the right time to bring things to the boil – though you (do) have them simmering’.

A skilful negotiation of youth work’s entry into spaces which are young people’s is most obviously demanded of detached workers – seen by some as ‘weirdos wanting to talk to kids’ and facing reactions varying from indifference to at least mild mickey-taking. If they do not want young people simply ‘running off laughing’, these workers may

have to make decisions ‘on the wing’ about whether and how to respond to, say, young people (literally) playing with fire in a public place.

However, though more elusive and though sometimes for workers expressed in frustrating ways, this sense of ownership of youth work spaces by young people ultimately underpins the practice much more widely. Thus for months a young man may choose not to look a youth worker in the eye as he comes into the centre. A shrug may dismiss an invitation to talk even when the young person is obviously feeling down. A decision may be made by members on whether the police may come into the club – or not. ‘We decide these things here’, is the message, ‘even though you, the youth workers, are formally in charge’.

Where even limited degrees of



4. Practising

ownership are not a given – where for example the youth work is being ‘hosted’ by a non-youth work agency such as a PRU with its constraining one and a half hour teaching periods – a youth worker will seek to go through a careful negotiation of role and style. Moreover, even a ‘dedicated’ youth space like a youth club may find itself stretched to or even beyond its limit when suddenly invaded by a tight-knit and rowdy group of young women with little initial understanding of, or tolerance for its rules, both hidden and explicit.

Nonetheless, as more than one of the stories makes clear, where young people do come to feel that the spaces are significantly ‘theirs’, they are then experienced as **safe**. Often this really does mean protection from violence or abuse or other physical dangers on the streets. Within this, too, may be some felt protection from peer

pressures to be involved in risky behaviours which, young people will often acknowledge within a youth work relationship, they’d much prefer not to have to deal with.

The protections on offer however are not just from tangling with the police or ‘keeping us out of trouble’. ‘Being safe’ here, as understood by workers but especially young people, again often means something more subtle, less tangible – the provision of ‘a sanctuary’, of ‘a calm and welcoming space (away from) the negative distractions’ of home; the one place to open its doors to them; time out from the expectations of parents and a tight-knit community; or of somewhere to be and someone to greet you ‘when it felt like the whole world shut you out ...’ It is these rules of engagement which, once young people have convinced themselves they are authentic, draw and then

hold them in – especially often those who feel alienated from the more formal, bureaucratic, controlling and sometimes discriminatory spaces of the education and welfare systems.

Improvisation – with consistency

The considerable room for manoeuvre which such environments have given workers have, at least implicitly, legitimised and even sometimes encouraged creativity, allowing them ‘without “blagging it” to draw on (their) improvisational skills’ – to develop a ‘process which could not be scripted in advance’. Even when having to work within a laid-down curriculum, for example, by starting from a young man’s strongly expressed interest in motorbikes a youth worker can help him design a ‘virtual’ trip whose very real destination is a range of externally validated qualifications. A baking

session can become the arena for simple but spontaneous forms of risk-taking and confidence-building. In a very public situation a worker can, off-the-cuff, conduct a lengthy and sensitive conversation with a touchy young woman entirely through written notes; or offer a one-liner piece of ‘careers advice’ while all eyes stay firmly on the pool table; or out of a passing and wordless off-duty encounter with a young man develop a lengthy and complex script writing, drama and film making ‘project’. Indeed, the very act of trying to convert the improvised into the pre-arranged – sitting around in the worker’s office ‘just chatting, having a laugh and a row’ into ‘a discussion group’ – can be enough to reinstate barriers which the young people were slowly lowering.

Here too, however, the youth worker faces dilemmas since consistency and reliability also



remain crucial characteristics, including, as more than one of the stories reveals, helping a group to set and then keep to its own agreed ground rules. Staying flexible, responding imaginatively to events as they occur, can therefore never be confused with simply being 'laid back', 'going with the flow'. Even though, at a first encounter, a young man and his friends laughed at them and left them standing, the detached workers 'kept coming back and eventually invited me to attend the local youth centre', until, many months later, they turned up at his first youth work training course to give him a wave of support. As well as 'follow[ing] through on promises made' to the young women they met on the streets, workers 'stayed consistent in when and where they met the group'. So too did the PRU-based worker – by for example 'keeping promises to bring material such as a bike magazine'.

It is here that the features which so mark out youth work practice – informality, fluidity, spontaneity – can all too easily be misread, especially by an outsider as an off-the-cuff casualness when in fact what they mask are some of its core threads: a prepared mind, an attention to detail and trustworthiness.



To challenge and develop...

In their often very different ways, all the stories demonstrate how within a youth work environment workers, proactively and without their actions being experienced as disrespectful, challenge young people to go beyond their starting points. Here as elsewhere in youth work the focus remains on strengths, on potential – on what this young person may themselves be and could become. 'Outcomes' seen as important are not therefore pre-defined within narrow policy parameters. Rather, they are expressed as 'the qualities you've got as a person ... and that everyone else has (as an) individual...', as 'staying myself' and ultimately as becoming 'the person I am today'.

Often this 'educational side' of the work will be explicitly welcomed by young people – 'learning things we really didn't get to learn about

at school and being able to do projects'. Sometimes it will be implemented in very direct ways: by handing out leaflets on drugs and alcohol or displaying wall posters which, somewhat surprisingly, may be remembered many years later. On occasions it may take the form of opening up a room for doing homework away from family pressures.

For the young person, however, that homework room may mean much more than the mere provision of some physical space. It may support a wavering commitment to hang on in school, in the longer run therefore helping to build a very personal 'sense of achievement'. Under the label 'mentoring training', some of the young people involved may come to realise what they don't know but need to know, and how their personalities and values ('morals') impact on others. In the process they may also be



4. Practising

opened up to new kinds of social interaction and have their social networks widened – or, in another situation, learn ‘how to really work as a team’.

Indeed, once a more trusting relationship has started to build, the worker’s challenge may become very direct, planned and targeted, using the opportunities provided by the openness of the setting to examine situations and issues as they occur in highly critical ways. One young person may be offered a straightforward piece of advice not to make a particular career choice. Another may be given marks out of ten, not for a written assignment but for how they handled a particular social exchange – and also asked open-ended questions about their knee-jerk ‘tendency to push boundaries’. A ‘critical dialogue’ may be started within a group on its members’ prejudicial attitudes; or listening and hearing

games used to get a group of young women to think critically about how they communicate with each other; or a lengthy dialogue initiated aimed at persuading young men not to carry knives.

Behind what one young man described as ‘activities (which) may seem very basic to outsiders and can often be taken for granted’, youth workers are thus seeking to make offers which are ultimately ‘educational’ in the broadest sense. This will be done in ways which leave young people themselves choice and remain respectful of their family and community loyalties. Nonetheless, again often requiring a tense balancing act, the intention will be to seek to stretch the young people to think and look outside their personal ‘box’: to suggest not just that they could go to places – intellectual, emotional, social as well as physical – to which they have never have been

before, but which they may see as way beyond their aspirations, even perhaps as ‘not for people like me’.

... with and through groups ...

Precisely because youth work is so substantially a young people’s space, most of it occurs within and through their peer groups. This certainly includes recognising how these can limit, even damage, individuals within them – supporting expectations of heavy drinking or carrying knives, distracting from educational or job aspirations, reinforcing offensively racist and sexist views and behaviour, exerting pressures to ‘become more involved in criminal activity’.

In very deliberate ways, youth work seeks not just to protect against these risks nor even merely to challenge them but very deliberately to build positively beyond them. Where the police may

see a gang or teachers a disruptive class, the youth worker starts by looking for, and then embracing, the in-built possibilities of young people’s wish to ‘do things with my mates’ – the group solidarities it can produce, the collective identities it can generate, the skills and resources that may then be released and shared. How otherwise could a group of young people, many black, even consider taking on the police and challenging the harassment they get from them? How could young women tensely at odds with their community end up as members of their local youth forum and with self-images and aspirations so shifted that, paradoxically, three years later they no longer need the group? Or, contradictorily again, venture out from a tight and hugely supportive traveller community to risk a programme of challenging activities in a local youth centre? Or at a residential event open



themselves up to new people to the point where 'after a couple of hours we're all sound with each other'? How without each other's support could young people in search of town centre sociability and fun entertain the idea of working with a graffiti artist and then go on to make demands of their local council and contribute to its youth strategy?

Not only were the chances very slim that any one of these young people, whatever their personal strengths, would have done any of this on their own. Together, within youth work contexts and with the skilled support of youth workers, they have generated 'outcomes' well beyond the sum of their groups' individual parts.

...to individuals...

With all their strengths however, as was acknowledged above, groups

are not of course panaceas. People – not just young people – often feel at their loneliest in a crowd. That crowd may not be very welcoming or inclusive – indeed, it may be experienced as shutting you out. It may not value or show much respect for the particular skills you as an individual are bringing to it; or in its determination to 'have fun' it may be closed to the personal traumas you are dealing with elsewhere. The group may be the place, too, where those unwanted peer pressures are felt most keenly and are hardest to resist.

However, again paradoxically, it is precisely out of the youth worker's close and often intimate involvement with young people in their groups – via for example 'a whole weekend devoted to you' – that many often hidden or masked individual needs emerge and get responses. The gains then may be as practical as finding a football

team for a young woman to join or persuading the apparently 'hard man' of a skinhead group to become the centre's paid cleaner. But they may also be very personal: feeling affirmed by having some dignity restored in your relations with the police; or no longer seeing yourself as 'scum'; or being able to say out loud: 'I'm a Traveller – and proud'. Sometimes it may even mean in time being able to conclude: 'I wouldn't be the person I am today'; or ending up believing that 'I ... (am) good enough to do something worthwhile, and in my own right'.

Out of youth workers' work in and with groups, without resort to elaborate assessment frameworks or referral procedures, individuals also find their way to the support they need for dealing with acute and potentially disabling personal problems – support which they may never deliberately go looking

for or be willing to accept in other settings. As the young man caring for his alcoholic mother realised many years later, in theory he'd been 'a prime candidate for the attention of agencies ...which are now part of integrated youth support services'. However, he 'simply didn't trust them', choosing instead to live in his own 'secretive world, outside all official surveillance', into which even the youth workers he'd started to trust were admitted only very slowly.

Responses to such individuals often require within youth work a very delicate negotiation, taken at the young person's pace and with the support offered only when they are ready to tell their story themselves – '... when I was comfortable to do so'. Yet within the open and 'free' space of youth work young people may both accept very practical support – such as a bus pass to help protect them from police



4. Practising

harassment – and gain the emotional learning which this can bring. It may be remembered in a very generalised way, as ‘talk about anything in the world... ..family problems, pregnancies, school issues, friend problems and a lot more...’, producing ‘the best advice anyone could give’. Or it may be very focused: impromptu ‘counselling’ for a young woman living for years with the trauma of seeing a brother beaten up by the police and for another on the verge of self-harming; or over the years sustaining a relationship with a young woman after a custodial sentence who’s been left behind by her peers.

Often such work will require what one of the story writers described in discussion as ‘a nuanced approach’ – particularly for example to discern the deep personal hurt that may underlie a young black woman’s overtly racist reaction to a white

worker. However, within the melee of group activity and churning relationships that are the public image of so much youth work, such individualised approaches and ‘outcomes’ will usually remain hidden. Most certainly – especially what has been prevented – will go unrecorded and unquantified even though for the young people concerned they may have acted as a prop during grim times and could occasionally have been life-changing – or even life-saving.

...via complex communication, towards consistent and trustworthy relationships...

The communication between young person and youth worker which feeds these relationships is often complex and sometimes barely (if at all) dependent on words: as one worker put it, the product of using two ears and one mouth in that proportion. Detached workers thus

spend a week just listening to young people, giving them a chance – for the first time apparently – to say what they think and want. In a drop-in, gentle advances and inoffensive questions are for weeks rebuffed. A whole intimate conversation is carried on by an exchange of written notes. After the gait of a young man betrays to the worker that he is carrying a knife, the most significant ‘content’ of the follow up exchange is what is not said – but mutually understood. The very success of these ‘conversations’ may depend on a tricky judgement that, here and now and despite the risks involved, words might actually be unhelpful, even damaging.

Indeed, risk-taking emerges from the stories as an essential – integral – ingredient of the trust-building process on which youth work relationships depend. Thus, for ‘walls of antagonism’ to begin to come down, young people may

have to be allowed to take control of expensive equipment. After an apparently anxious young woman has rejected one offer to talk, a worker may need to take a chance on a second very different approach. And the risk may have to be taken that conversations will suddenly break out within a group of traveller young women on topics of which their mothers would not approve.

...in the ‘community’

What this last example also illustrates is that the much-vaunted ‘community’ within which youth work operates may be a far more complicated phenomenon than is suggested by the current slick Big Society rhetoric. On a marginalised estate, a youth club may indeed find itself acting as a community’s ‘last nerve ending – close it down and you lose the feel for what’s going on’. Elsewhere, it was clearly important for an isolated young



man struggling with problems at home to know that the detached work team used the local café, while workers known to some of the young people from contacts in their home area found they had a bit of a head start when they met them again in the town centre.

On the other hand, as the traveller story vividly demonstrates, where they are particularly close-knit and fiercely independent, communities can also impose highly constraining expectations, even requirements, making them very hard for a youth worker to access. For many young people, too, 'community' can be experienced as far from harmonious, not least because of how they themselves may behave within it and be treated by it. It was after all in a park close to the youth centre that a youth worker first realised that a centre member was carrying a knife – an increasingly de-harmonising

feature of this community and many others. Though for them community roots were vital, a highly disruptive group of young women needed to take a long bumpy youth work journey before, in the eyes of other residents, they could find anything like a positive place within it. Nor were those black young men constantly being stopped and searched by the police likely to look on all aspects of their 'community' as positive features in their lives. If, as educators, youth workers are to fulfil their commitment to stretch and challenge young people, finding clear – though, again, respectful – pathways through the contradictory pressures embedded in 'community' will often demand subtle judgements and difficult practical choices.

From the professional to the personal

By many youth workers, even

those not living in the community where they work, some blurring of professional-personal boundaries is seen as crucial if they are to build the trust essential to making the voluntary relationship with young people work. Thus, one worker, as well as owning up to mistakes, openly acknowledged to the student he was 'teaching' that he knew nothing about a key element of the subject matter – motorbikes. The worker seeking access to a close community of travellers saw it as important to share learning from her own sometimes difficult adolescent experience, while during a testing emotional exchange another worker at one point made it explicit to the young person that she was responding 'as a mother'.

In very different circumstances, a worker's admission that they had, without their parents knowing, worked all night at a club, proved the trigger for the young people

'sharing some of their own clandestine activity'.

For one young man such openness had left a 'most influential memory (of) a youth worker who talked about their own loss of a family member' in a way which for him 'made the world a better place'. For another it helped him access 'a range of positive adult role models'. However because, as another worker put it, youth work is 'not just a job', by 'going the extra mile' it could also for the worker have unintended and maybe even unwelcome personal consequences – such as getting a phone call from a distressed young person in the middle of a Boxing Day meal. It could also pose some testing professional ethical dilemmas – over for example whether and how to use crucial 'intelligence' on knife-carrying picked up during a family expedition to the local park.



4. Practising

Activities – ‘vehicles’, or ends in themselves?

Some of these stories also illustrate youth work’s complicated relationship with the often recreational ‘activities’ it promotes. Graffiti art, drama and film-making, litter-picking and gardening projects, cooking and eating together – none, at least initially, may be selected as an end in itself and certainly not because it might lead to an accredited outcome. On the contrary, youth work’s conventional wisdom would assert that such activities are to be valued primarily as vehicles for carrying young people on testing personal and emotional journeys. This might include developing a ‘relationship with the youth centre and the staff ... so that at critical moments in my life I was confident enough to go to the centre and ask for help’. Or they would highlight ‘the discussions that suddenly took

off – about racism, about violence, about youth unemployment’.

Yet activities which youth work initiates are often valued as ends in themselves, with ‘impacts’ in the here-and-now felt by the young person to be as important as any contributions they might make to longer-term personal or social ‘transitions’. As a minimum, they may be rated just for the ‘fun’ these provide – what the young man quoted above described as otherwise unavailable opportunities for ‘shar[ing] many happy times with friends and the centre staff on outings to the beach, football tournaments, bike rides’.

However, as the work develops, for many young people the activity in itself may become increasingly significant. For the young man planning a virtual trip round the world, this was indisputable as he strived to get the qualifications

he wanted. In youth work settings which are much more clearly ‘open access’, such shifts in motivation may occur too – as when as a result simply of sitting around in the worker’s office young people learnt to use a typewriter or as trust built a shoe-making workshop morphed from ‘hippie-sandal making crap’ into an opportunity to repair Doc Martens.

Indeed as the focus on the task grows, achieving as high a standard as possible may also become important. How effective, both young people and workers may start to ask, will this artwork be in convincing local councillors to open up a new town centre facility? Can we make this script, our acting, the filming powerful enough to convince other young people not to carry knives? How skilled will these young women be on the local youth forum in representing the interests

and needs of other young people? Will these young women feel that what they have baked is good enough to be enjoyed by their families? Will this health workshop be engaging enough to motivate this young man to start coming to the youth centre; will this residential course be well enough thought out and presented to ensure these young people become competent mentors? Though in youth work the quality of the journey is always crucial, youth workers have to keep a very sharp eye, too, on the potential importance to young people of its ultimate destination.

Working in partnership – in young people’s interests

At moments these stories also give us glimpses into ‘partnership-working’ which, like ‘community’, is now too readily viewed by policy-makers and managers as another

self-evident 'good'. Yet here too the realities can be complicated. For one thing, as was acknowledged by one worker interviewed, other services may discover youth work only 'when things go wrong or at least when they aren't going right – about guns, gangs, knives, teenage pregnancy, terrorism'. 'Partnership working' then may suddenly emerge because – referring back to an earlier image – other professionals know that, 'their particular "pot" (is) already simmering' within the youth centre, thereby making some of their targets more attainable.

Though none were chosen specifically for this reason, it is therefore not surprising perhaps that, albeit in different ways, most of the stories where partnership working figures at least indicate or imply how hard youth workers have to work to ensure it works in **young people's interests** – not least,

to fulfil youth work's commitment to help tip some of the balances of power in their favour. This emerges as especially true when the task is 'to get us youth and the police to co-operate', as it is in a number of the stories – though, soberingly, one young man is very clear that 'a lot of the time it didn't work', not least because 'at the age we was at ... let's face it, everyone liked a police chase'!

Management and funding

The 'graffiti' and, less explicitly, the PRU and the 'knife crime' stories are encouraging for youth workers in showing internal managerial systems, at least up to 2009-10, actively supporting the face-to-face work. The example of the girls' group, however, suggests something rather different: that insofar as there is 'impact', it may have been achieved in spite not just of managers' attitudes but

also of management procedures which underrate or marginalise the distinctive ways in which youth work operates and achieves its impacts. The demise of the skinhead drop-in also vividly illustrates how – well before the ConDem cuts hit – funding for even the best youth work has been hand-to-mouth.

5. What future for youth work?



Since these stories were written those cuts in state funding have across the country made the future of youth work – to put it at its mildest - increasingly uncertain. Indeed, as the account of the knife crime project was being finalised the very existence of the youth centre which initiated it was under serious threat, while the young man's account of why young people still need youth clubs was written as a contribution to a public campaign to save the whole of his local authority Youth Service from closure.

Which is precisely why the In Defence of Youth Work campaign has gathered these stories, as qualitative evidence of youth work's distinctive and positive approach to the complexities and imponderables of young people's lives. It is also why IDYW has joined with the unions and other campaigning groups to try and preserve the facilities through which youth work is provided and defend the posts and the skills of workers essential to achieving the impacts policy-makers seek – and which young people value, and deserve.

6. Campaigning and educating

Given In Defence of Youth Work's stress on the importance of process in youth work, it should come as no surprise that we lay great store by the means through which the booklet and DVD might be used. Whilst gathering the stories we have been involved in passionate and challenging discussions about the character of youth work itself and its interaction with the constraints experienced by other agencies. We hope that the booklet and DVD will spark similar animated debate amongst those who read, listen to and watch its content. Thus below we offer some suggestions about how it might be used.

It is intended that the booklet/DVD will be distributed widely amongst politicians, managers, public sector trade unionists, welfare and education workers. Of course its primary focus is on enhancing people's understanding of youth

work as an integral and significant element in the provision of services for young people. However the case for a democratic youth work is in harmony with the broader argument for public services within which workers and users take the lead in creating provision that is accountable, responsive and not for profit.

Potentially the example of democratic youth work illustrates how a partnership between the state and voluntary sectors might be renewed with the latter rediscovering its vital role as a critical and proudly independent 'friend', as an expression of civil society in action.

'This Is Youth Work' not only speaks for itself, but is a flexible campaigning and educational resource. As well as the stories in written and recited versions, it includes analysis of the social

context and lessons for practice, together with young people speaking about what youth work means to them. Campaigning is best done from the ground up and you will have your own ideas of how to use the 'Stories' in your local area. The following are merely suggestions:

Presentations

Many people will be interested to hear about the qualitative impact of youth work, for example trade union branches, local authority staff, voluntary sector meetings and workers' conferences. The DVD and a selection of stories (which are recorded on the DVD as well as contained in the booklet) can be used to introduce the issue to the different audiences and stimulate debate. Possible questions for discussion can be found on our In Defence website.





6. Campaigning and educating

Lobbying

If you have contact with sympathetic decision-makers such as local councillors, MPs, civil servants and local government officers, voluntary organisation trustees and managers, send them a copy of 'This Is Youth Work'. Follow up with a call or email to ask them their response and how they feel that they might use it, pressing the need for open and public debate. This will be particularly useful and necessary in areas where youth services are being cut and/or restructured.

Linking up with other campaigns and campaign groups

Defending youth work provision is of course only one contribution to the defence of public services overall. Consider therefore how the booklet/DVD can be used to ensure that other groups and campaigns are

aware of what is happening to youth work services and that the defence of these services is fully linked into overall anti-cuts campaigns.

Training, staff development and educational contexts

We hope that the resource will be utilised within youth work, community education, social work and trade union training and education. The text of the stories could be explored alongside sections of the analysis to start discussions in small groups, as a complement to watching the DVD. Again suggested themes for discussion will be found online.

With youth groups

The DVD ought to be especially effective in getting young people to air their views and consider how they can defend their club or project. Our web site contains

a session plan which can be adapted for your setting, whether it is a youth club, detached project, youth democracy project or an independent group such as Woodcraft Folk.

Sharing and producing local stories

The booklet/DVD might well be used as a template/stimulus by youth workers and young people in search of their own stories. The appearance of stories grounded in local cultures would be particularly powerful. You will find online an outline of the ['Socratic'] method we used to collect a number of our stories. As we hope that our effort is but a starting point rather than an end in itself, we are keen to discuss posting your versions of the youth work experience on our site or indeed in future publications.

Support for your campaign

Costs/distance permitting IDYW activists from the steering group and beyond could be available, especially at an initial stage, to be a supportive part of this process.

Get in touch through the Co-ordinator at tonymtaylor@gmail.com

For further information and support

Web sites and blogs

In Defence of Youth Work site, which will include a section dedicated to 'THIS IS YOUTH WORK' containing the booklet in pdf form and the video.

<http://www.indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk/wordpress>

UNISON site

<http://www.unison.org.uk>

Community and Youth Workers in Unite (CYWU)

<http://www.cywu.org.uk/>

UNITE site.

<http://www.unitetheunion.org/>

Publications

The Benefits of Youth Work, LLUK and UNITE [2010] available as pdf.

Informal Learning in Youth Work, Janet Batsleer [2009] Sage:London.

The Purposes and Outcomes of Youth Work, Maurice Devlin and Anne Gunning [2009] Irish Youth Work Press.

Youth Work : A Manifesto for Our Times, Bernard Davies [2005]
Youth &Policy, 88

