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Living Contradictions in the Professional Practice of Informal Education

Résumé

Ce texte présente une recherche portant sur un groupe d’étudiants de licence et au-delà du département Jeunesse et Travail communautaire et se rapportant aux aspects de leurs pratiques qui mettent en question leurs engagements relatifs aux principes éthiques et professionnels du Travail avec la jeunesse. Leurs comptes rendus critiques des récits qu’ils font donnent à penser qu’ils sont souvent conduits à se vivre eux-mêmes comme des « contradictions vivantes » quand leurs valeurs sont niées dans la pratique, tant par eux-mêmes que par les institutions où ils finissent leur scolarité. Tout en épousant les principes professionnels et éthiques du Travail avec la jeunesse, certains ont intérieurisé l’idée selon laquelle les jeunes sont vulnérables à de nombreuses menaces, telles que le chômage, la prise de drogue, la criminalité et des histoires extrémistes. La praxis est conçue comme étant le champ d’application qui permet de théoriser la pratique du travail avec la jeunesse, tout en rompant le statu quo et en humanisant les relations avec les collègues et avec les jeunes.

Mots-clés : Travail sur la jeunesse, contradictions vivantes, théorie vivante, valeurs, praxis.

Abstract

This paper reports on a study with a group of undergraduate and postgraduate Youth and Community Work students in relation to aspects of their practice that challenged their commitments to the ethical and professional principles of Youth Work. Their critical narrative accounts suggest that they often experienced themselves as ‘living contradictions’ when their values were negated in their practice by themselves as well as by the institutions where they completed their placements. Whilst espousing professional and ethical Youth Work principles, some had internalised the view that continues to represent young people as vulnerable to a wide range of threats from unemployment, drug abuse, criminality and extremist narratives. Praxis is conceptualized as providing the scope for theorising youth work practice while disrupting the status quo and humanising relationships between colleagues and with young people.

Keywords: Youth Work, living contradictions, living theory, values, praxis.
Introduction

This paper reports on a study which sought to engage Youth and Community Work students in interrogating common sense categories in representations of young people in practitioners' narratives and discursive practices as well as their own during their professional formation. The participants were invited to bring into sharp focus aspects of their practice that challenged their ethical and professional values as youth workers. Their critical narrative accounts suggest that they often experienced themselves as ‘living contradictions’ (Whitehead, 1989) when their values were negated in their practice by themselves as well as by the institutions where they completed their fieldwork practice. Whilst espousing professional and ethical Youth Work values, some had internalised the view that continues to represent young people, and particularly those from minority groups, as vulnerable to a wide range of threats, from unemployment, drug abuse, criminality and extremist narratives.

In a bid to resolve the inevitable dissonance resulting from holding conflicting values and beliefs, a common strategy among many Youth Workers was to become ‘bilingual’ by simultaneously echoing and contradicting dominant youth policy discourses. However, such attempts often resulted in what Ball described as ‘structural and individual schizophrenia’ that culminate in the ‘alienation of the self’ (2001:147).

Praxis is conceptualized as providing the scope for theorising youth work practice (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) while disrupts the status quo (Mclaren, 2003; Apple, 2003; Giroux, 2003) and humanising relationships between colleagues and with young people (Freire, 1973). This necessitates a commitment to the transformative potential of Youth and Community Work, not in terms of its capacity to fashion resilient employable young people, but its ability to engage youth workers and young people in an overt critique of the ideologies that continue to widen social divisions to the detriment of marginalized groups in an increasingly unequal society (Hills, 2010).

The Professionalisation of Youth Work

The professionalisation of Youth and Community Work in England and Wales began with the establishment of the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) in 1961, as part of the Albermarle Report’s ten years development plan. The Albermarle Report (1960) is seen as a significant landmark in the history of Youth Services in England and Wales, not least because it led to the establishment of over 3000 youth centres throughout the 1960s and 1970s, after a period of significant decline during the 1950s.

The number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) offering professionally validated (JNC) Youth and Community Work programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels has more than doubled in the past decade. This in part reflects the previous Government’s commitment to the provision of better quality educational, recreational and welfare services to children and young people. Furthermore, Youth and Community Work became a graduate profession in January 2010, which has meant that no HEI could offer a professionally validated Youth Work programme at less than degree level.
Although undergraduate and postgraduate JNC bearing Youth and Community Work programmes have been in existence for decades, the majority of universities and former polytechnics offered Certificate or Diploma of Higher Education level qualifications, equivalent to one and two years of undergraduate study, respectively. The shift to a graduate Youth Work profession has helped raise the professional status of Youth Work while making it a popular career destination among an increasingly younger student population. Previously, most of the students who enrolled on Youth and Community Work courses were mature students who often had extensive experience of working with young people, but little or no formal qualifications.

The profile of Youth Work students has changed considerably over the past few years. They are much younger and therefore do not command the same level of practical experience that their predecessors had. However, Youth and Community Work courses place at least as much importance on fieldwork practice as they do on policies and the ideologies they represent.

Students on the Bachelor of Arts (BA) Youth and Community Work are expected to complete no fewer than 888 hours of fieldwork practice over the three years of their undergraduate study. On the other hand, Masters of Arts (MA) Youth and Community Work students are expected to complete at least a total of 592 hours over two semesters.

Most students negotiate their own placements and many base their fieldwork practice on their place of paid employment, be it a youth club or a school, where they are expected to complete between 20 to 30 hours per week. They are also required to undertake one of the placements within an alternative Youth Work setting, to ensure that they have ample opportunities to experience different models of practice.

In order to assure the quality of the fieldwork practice and to provide effective support to students, three-way meetings are held at the beginning and end of each placement, when one of the Youth and Community course tutors, a Mentor and the student negotiate a Learning Agreement in line with the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work, which informs the student’s placement experience. The role of the Mentor is very important in scaffolding the experiential learning of the student and in helping him or her relate theory to practice. Mentors are normally expected to be JNC qualified with extensive experience of working with young people in a variety of Youth Work settings.

Additionally, students are supported through academic advice and guidance at and attend a range of taught sessions, including lectures, seminars and professional workshops, which provide a crucial interface between theory and practice. As required by National Youth Agency (NYA), which is the body that confers and monitors professional validation, the value base of Youth and Community programmes is reflected in the learning outcomes of the modules and permeates throughout its assessment methods, the dialogical teaching and learning style adopted by teaching staff and the centrality of its focus on inclusion and diversity. The value base of Youth Work represents a shared understanding and a reference point which underpins relationships between students, tutors, mentors, young people and the wider community throughout the students’ formation.
Youth and Community programmes explicitly embrace a value base that valorises a commitment to social justice. The nature and purposes of youth and community work are viewed as engaging in interactions and relationships with young people and community members, using a variety of activities as tools to enable them to broaden their understandings of the structures within which social identities are constructed and positioned. In addition to the acquisition of life enhancing skills, the purpose of youth work is to invite young people to challenge ideologies and practices which lead to discrimination and injustice.

Youth and community Work takes place in a variety of settings in partnership with various professionals to promote and safeguard the well-being of young people. It involves different approaches characterised by an authentic commitment to self-awareness raising and participation in the decision-making process at all levels of interaction with young people. Good models of Youth Work practice involve engaging in critical reflective practice to make value commitments explicit in practice, questioning assumptions and maintaining professional boundaries with colleagues, young people and members of the community. As change agents Youth Workers are required to engage in anti-discriminatory practices and interventions. However, as a result of increasing accountability demands and imperatives to produce tangible outputs, many students find themselves in situations where they have to reconcile between the principles that inform the commitments described above and the imperative to account for the work they do in instrumental terms. The strategies used by the students to negotiate these contradictions in their professional practice are explored in the remainder of this paper.

Methodology

A total of fourteen undergraduate and postgraduate Youth and Community Work students took part in semi-structured one to one and focus group interviews which focused on eliciting the students' experiences of the challenges which arose out of the interface between theory, policy and practice both at the university and in the fieldwork placement agency. The primary focus of the interviews was on how students negotiated contradictions between their professional values and the ideological representations of young people coded in prevalent discursive practices in the youth organisations where they completed their fieldwork practice.

Excerpts from the data were chosen on the basis of their salience to the key themes of the study to describe, interpret and explain how Youth Workers in formation negotiated the contradictions and dilemmas resulting from dissonance between professional values and policy imperatives. Additional post-interview notes proved extremely helpful during subsequent analysis and discussion. Furthermore, as a former Youth Worker and a Youth and Community Lecturer over the past several years, I brought to the analysis a shared understanding of issues surrounding Youth and Community Work and Youth Work Education, and this enabled me to generate contextualized critical accounts of the experiences that Youth and Community Work students encountered in their attempts to link theory to practice.
The Policy Context

The renewed focus on ‘troublesome’ young people in the national media in recent months as a result of riots on the streets of major English cities, including London, Birmingham, Manchester and Bristol, was concomitant with claims by policy makers, in the immediate aftermath of the riots, that the burning and looting of high street shops by large crowds of young people was sheer manifestation of ‘criminality pure and simple’ (Guardian, 9th August 2011). However, this alarmingly reductive interpretation was ironically later juxtaposed with inferences, made by both Conservative and Labour Leaders, of links between scandals in parliament, journalism and the banking sector, (Guardian, 15th August 2011) with the growing social unrest. Prior to the July 2011 riots, the debate about youth became marginalized despite the protests against Youth Service cuts. The Government’s fantasy of a ‘big society’ was soon replaced by recurring cries in the narratives of Conservative and Liberal politicians alike of a broken Britain. Indeed, shortly after the riots, Prime Minister David Cameron gave a speech at a Youth Centre in London where he pledged to put fixing broken Britain ‘back to the top of my political agenda’, (ibid).

It is not within the purview of this paper to examine the causes of the riots, but suffice to say that they are complex and multi-faceted, and may require radical solutions to address wider social and economic disadvantage that is unlikely to disappear in the immediate future, despite the former New Labour Government’s lofty goal of eradicating child poverty in Britain by 2020. This will certainly not happen in our lifetime, especially given the unprecedented economic crisis and the recent findings in a report commissioned by the National Equality Panel titled An anatomy of economic inequality in the UK (2010), which opens with the statement:

Britain is an unequal country, more so than many other industrial countries and more so than a generation ago. This is manifest in many ways - most obviously in the gap between those who are well off and those who are less well off. But inequalities in people’s economic positions are also related to their characteristics - whether they are men or women, their ages, ethnic backgrounds, and so on (Hills, 2010: 1).

Indeed UNICEF (2007) published a report on a comprehensive assessment of the lives and wellbeing of children and adolescents in the economically advanced nations, which depicted a bleak picture of the state of the nation’s children and young people. The UK ranked last among 21 industrialised nations for the wellbeing, quality of family life and the number of children living in relative poverty. Britain was also reported to have high rates of teenage drinking, bullying, early sexual intercourse, teenage pregnancy and obesity.

However, the coalition politicians argued that nothing could justify the criminality and mindless thuggery unleashed on the streets of our cities by a few ‘troublemakers’. Their views are not new and neither are they the exclusive preserve of Liberal or Conservative politicians. At the time he was Prime Minister, Tony Blair blamed the then increase in youth gun crime on a ‘distinctive black youth culture’ (Guardian, 12th April 2007). In pursuit of a ‘third way’ approach to policy
making, combining, arguably antithetical Old Labour social integrationist values with New Right ideologies (Levitas, 1998), Blair counterbalanced toughness on crime and anti-social behaviour with an emphatic pledge to focus on ‘Education, Education, Education’ and safeguarding the welfare of children through the introduction of a raft of strategies and legislation aimed at tackling social exclusion among the young through education, welfare and crime prevention.

These have included on one hand, Connexions (DfEE, 2000); Transforming Youth Work (DfES, 2002), Every Child Matters (DfES, 2004), the Children’s Act (2004), Youth Matters (DfES, 2005) and the Aiming High: Ten Year Strategy (DfES, 2007). On the other hand, new criminal justice legislation was introduced, including the Crime and Disorder Act (1998), Powers of the Criminal Courts Act (2000), Criminal Justice and Police Act (2001), Criminal Justice Act (2003) and Anti-Social Behaviour Order Act (2003). Young people and their parents were brought to account for allowing themselves to become socially excluded and parents were penalised for their children’s anti-social behaviour.

There is a view that policy responses to problems associated with young people are essentially mechanisms for their containment based on a ‘deficit’ model (Jefferis and Smith 1999; Griffin, 1993), where young people are perceived as deviant and attempts are made to restore them to ‘normality’. Allied to the moral panic about the perceived delinquency of a growing segment of British youth, high levels of truancy and the lack of interest in education by a large number of young men is perceived as a national problem that is assumed to exacerbate social divisions by widening the socio-economic gap between the educated and the uneducated (Walton, 2000).

Consequently, along with criminality and employability, these categories became priority areas for Children and Young People’s Services to tackle and the intertextuality drawn upon in the practitioners’ narratives suggests that negative representations of young people became naturalised in their Youth Work discourses, alongside positive representations of Youth Work as offering transformative potentials for young people and their communities. Fairclough (1992) used the term ‘intertextuality’ in discourse to describe ‘The property texts have of being full of “snatches” of other texts, which may be explicitly demarcated or merged in, and which the text may assimilate, contradict or ironically echo’ (1992:84). Implicit in the Youth and Community students’ narratives were representations of young people that both echoed and contradicted youth policy discourses, as will be discussed in the next section.

Living Contradictions

Like all professionals in the wider field of Education and social welfare, Youth Work practitioners often experience themselves as what Whitehead (1989) calls ‘living contradictions’ when their values are negated in their practice by themselves as well as by the institutions where they work. The Youth Work students’ talk about practice embodied contradictory representations of the nature and purposes of Youth Work. When asked to describe what the aim of Youth Work was, they expressed commitments to forms of Youth Work that valorised the
importance of young people’s self-advocacy, participation and involvement in decision-making about issues that affected their lives. However, they also talked about Youth Work practice in ways that re-produced a view of young people in deficit and in need of remedial intervention. The students at times drew on psycho-pathological discourse types, whereby young people were viewed as helpless vulnerable victims in need of therapy to help them cope with the harsh world in which they lived. One student said: ‘Youth work is holistic, in the sense that it is person-centred and non-judgemental’. He also subsequently said: ‘some young people are completely lost. They have very low self-esteem and fail miserably at everything they do. It is the role of Youth Workers to help them make sense of the chaos and work with them to help them regain self-esteem’.

The nature of Youth Work is simultaneously represented, in this student’s narrative, in non-judgemental, person-centred Rogerian terms and as the rescuer of dysfunctional and inherently deviant and deficient youth. There are clearly contradictions between these two rival conceptions of the nature and purposes of Youth Work. Indeed, the shared narratives of the students had strong echoes government youth policy priorities, woven into their descriptions and interpretations of Youth Work practice. They resonated with and contradicted dominant policy discourses about the self-exclusion of young people from black and working class communities. These discourses locate the problems associated with social exclusion with the young people themselves and fail to take into account the marginalizing effects of existing social systems and structures. What is worrying is that some of these policies have shaped Youth Work practice by focusing the intervention on returning ‘deficient’ youth to normality.

For example, a student said: ‘There are some seriously needy and vulnerable young people who need a lot of support. They need one to one type of interaction and it may take a long time to achieve a result with them’. When asked about what the result might be, the student said, ‘deep-seated poor self-esteem issues. It could be breaking the cycle of repeat offending. It could be getting a job interview or taking their education more seriously’.

Such depictions of the nature of Youth Work intervention is consistent with what Hayes (2004) called the ‘therapeutic turn’ in education and I would argue that a not too dissimilar therapeutic approach has become prevalent in Youth Work since late 90s, when a shift to case work through, for example, the Connexions Personal Advisors and Excellence in Cities (EiC) mentoring schemes began to frame aspects of Youth Work interventions. One of the strands of EiC involved the use of Learning Mentors in schools, many of whom came from a Youth Work background, to work within the pastoral care system targeting young people deemed at risk. The term Mentoring became a permanent fixture in the discourse about youth inclusion, as Colley pointed out:

In education, mentoring became a standard ingredient in the recipe of almost every major new policy initiative, including prevention of school truancy and drop-out from post-compulsory education and training (Colley, 2002: 522).
The problem with the therapeutic approach to working with young people is that it encourages passivity and acceptance of 'failure' and objectifies young people as 'cases', to be opened, then closed, presumably when the therapeutic intervention is completed. In the process, young people are expected to reveal aspects of their lives, which have led them to 'deviate' from established norms and expectations. Ecclestone argues that:

... notions of the Rogerian self, which is positive, optimistic and naturally disposed to improve, grow and learn, are giving way to a more negative, dysfunctional view of self and an acceptance of weakness caused by 'being only human',

(Ecclestone, 2004: 135).

Furthermore, Colley posits that some of the approaches to working with young people, e.g. through engagement mentoring, claim to be holistic, but 'represent everything that is antithetical to the original concept of holism' (Colley, 2003: 82). For example the statement made by one of the students about his approach being holistic, hardly reflects a holistic young person centred pedagogic approach and shows that the interest of young people is not the priority here. The object appeared to be to stop them from offending, help them get a job or stay on in school.

The label 'Not in Education Employment or Training' (NEET) was also frequently used by students to describe young people deemed to be at risk of social exclusion. When probed to explain if helping young people gain employment, education or training was the primary goal of Youth Work, one student replied that there were targets in place at the institution where he did his placement to reach a specified number of NEETs, to get them involved in activities that led to some form of accredited learning. There are two issues that I want to discuss in relation to what this student has said. Firstly, I want to examine how the label 'NEET' became part of youth workers' discourses. Secondly, I want to consider the marginalising effects of such labels on young people.

In their book, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Berger and Luckmann (1991) suggest that humans create the social world by selecting and ordering sense experience in particular ways and ascribing meanings to them, a process they describe as 'typification'. These *typifications* become 'habitualised' or normalised through interactions between social actors. Subjectivities are then reified in objective categories through language and discourse. This is in turn reinforced through socialisation and what had been constructed or created now becomes 'institutionalised' taken for granted objective reality.

Being a NEET is an example of such reification, which needs to be deconstructed in order to shed light on its ambiguity and to generate a better understanding of the processes that give rise to the construction of this category of deviant youth. Because, once a label is applied to an individual, it becomes a 'master status', that is, it overrides all other possible statuses that a person might possess. For instance, a young person might be 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (NEET), but they have multiple identities or statuses, e.g. being a person, being good at playing an instrument, and so on. Yet, the label NEET, essentialises the young person as having a fixed quality which is brought to the fore by the label applied
to her/him with powerful marginalizing effect. Furthermore, as Macdowell (1986) quoted in Ball (2006, 31) suggests ‘any discourse concerns itself with certain objects and puts forward certain concepts at the expense of others’. Dominant representations of young people in policy discourses suggest that they are viewed as either victims or perpetrators. Hence, far from being objective and neutral, labelling is tied to ideologies about the role of young people in society.

The debates about NEETs are linked to national concerns about the economic position of Britain in comparison to other nations. These are not new concerns, since the late 1980s, the instrumentalist view holds that educational interventions must lead to the development of competencies and dispositions, which would ultimately contribute to the prosperity of the nation. Indeed it was the perception that education was failing to do this that prompted James Callaghan (1976) to call for a ‘Great Debate’ in his Ruskin Speech. Callaghan believed that the purpose of education was to increase employability, and this view was amplified more forcefully during the conservative rein under Margaret Thatcher and it continued in different guises under New Labour and now, under the present Government. Increased Youth Workers’ workloads in an increasingly target driven system constrains their ability to deviate from tightly configured curricula, where the prevalent focus on tangible outcomes within the wider employability discourse leaves little space for Youth Workers to exercise their autonomy.

Youth Policies, such as Transforming Youth Work (DiES, 2002) and Youth Matters (DiES, 2005) redefined the role of Youth Workers and led to rival conceptions of the nature and purposes of Youth Work. Transforming Youth Work was introduced under New Labour following concerns raised by a Government sponsored audit of Youth Services in England carried out by Marken and Perrett (1998). The report found huge variability in the nature and quality of Youth Work in England as well as lack of evidence to substantiate Youth Workers’ claims about the excellent work they did with young people. Furthermore, Youth Workers and policy makers held different views about what constituted good quality Youth Work. Youth Workers often placed greater emphasis on the process rather than the outcome of the Youth Work intervention.

Transforming Youth Work (DiES, 2002) imposed new targets on Youth Services to reach a minimum of 25% of 13 to 19 year olds in each Borough and for 60% of those to be involved in personal and social development activities that lead to accredited outcomes. The expectation was that significant resources were to be deployed to target work with NEETS, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse and offending (DiES, 2002).

Youth Workers have had to demonstrate their accountability by working within institutional constraints, and their performance has been measured by the achievement of specified targets. When asked to provide examples of how Youth Workers were made accountable for the work they did, students cited excessively lengthy administrative procedures as the main deterrents to engaging with young people in a meaningful way. A student said ‘The head of service made us complete this audit for six weeks. We had to enter the details of every move we made, for six whole weeks! The problem was, it took hours each time to complete that
exercise! Ironically, some people started including when they went to the toilet and how long that took each time!' When asked why the exercise was conducted, she said: ‘they wanted to know precisely what we were doing so that they could make us do more work or get rid of some of us’.

The dominant discourse in this configuration is couched in an instrumentalist ideology that has pervaded youth policy and finds expression in the output driven Youth Work curriculum in terms of its focus on tangible outcomes, which are aligned with the wider discourse of employability and the needs of industry. Increasing accountability to central government, whose policies are guided by the interests of the industry and economy rather than those of young people, has had a negative impact on Youth Work. The marketisation of Youth Work has changed relationships into business transactions whereby youth provision became a commodity to be 'delivered' to 'customers' who are persuaded that they have a right to choose and demand the highest possible standards from Youth Workers. It is assumed that the application of free market principles to youth provision leads to 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' but there is little evidence to support such assumption. If anything, the application of market principles to public services has led to the fragmentation and deterioration of youth provision and the creation of an inequitable system with a widening gap between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

Theorising Youth Work Praxis

Aristotle made a distinction between two constructions of practice: practice as a craft or poiesis, which Coulter and Weins described as ‘a means-ends activity in which knowledge and skill (techne) are used to accomplish ends decided by the exercise of theoretical wisdom (sophia)’. (2002: p.16).

Aristotle described the second form of practice as praxis, characterised by Coulter and Weins as ‘moral-political action’. Given the subtle variations inherent in the definitions given to praxis in the literature, I draw on Freire’s definition of praxis as a combination of theory or reflection and practice or action. Freire (1973) suggests that the separation of action from reflection would either lead to 'mindless activism' or 'empty theorising'. Praxis is then a reflective process in which action is fused with reflection or theory in a mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship (Freire, 1973). The fusion of intention with action would necessitate conscious efforts to work toward greater congruence between embodied values and daily practices and to provide descriptions and explanations of the change realised in the process. This has strong resonance with the conceptualisation of practice as a ‘living educational theory’ (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006) which is guided by a set of questions that practitioners must ask in their quest to improve their practice. These are: What is my concern? Why am I concerned? What can I do about my concern? Finally, how do I account for the educational influence that I have on others?

Theorising Youth Work following this approach would lead to greater alignment between a commitment to the ethical and professional principles of Youth Work and Youth Work practice. Youth Work ethical and professional principles are thus used as standards of judgment in a critical reflective process oriented to reducing
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dissonance between values held by practitioners and their practice. It leads to attempts to work towards reducing contradictions by constantly asking: *How do I improve my practice?*. This is particularly important given that it was evident in the students’ narratives that they often engaged in making complex negotiations in their attempts to reconcile their experiential values with the constraints imposed on them by the structure and organisation of the fieldwork placement agencies. Some of the students with extensive experience of youth work were able to explain the sources of contradictions in their own understanding. One student said:

I got into Youth Work through volunteering, then paid part-time work. I left school with no qualifications. I did the in-house Ramp part-time Youth Work training that they had at the time. I latched on to every new jargon that I heard. It felt good to know these words. Now years later, I am finally at uni. doing this Youth Work degree. I am now realising that labels have a negative impact on young people. I am unlearning what I learnt years ago. I question everything I hear now.

Referring to the strategies he employed to appease the young people, while meeting his targets to get a set number of young people engaged in some form of accredited learning that led to tangible outcomes, a student said: *I say to the young people, let’s get the accredited stuff out of the way first, let’s tick the boxes and then we could do what we want after that*. Another one said *‘they want paperwork, let’s give it to them. At the end of the day, they are not interested in it themselves. They don’t even look at it!*'. Such accounts were common in the shared narratives of the students and pointed to significant discrepancies between attitudes and behaviours, that can be described as what social psychologists have called *cognitive dissonance*, (Festinger, 1957; Aronson, 1968; Steele, 1988; Elliot and Devine, 1994). Cognitive Dissonance theory posits that when people find themselves in situations where their behaviour conflicts with their attitudes, they either change the behaviour or change the attitude in question to ensure that the former is in alignment with the latter. However, Festinger (*ibid*) also found that dissonance reduction through attitude change is only possible in situations where individuals are able to exercise their free will. The students on placements have very little choice as far as the imperative to meet pre-determined institutional targets. For example, a Youth Worker who sees Youth Work as being ‘informed by a set of beliefs which include a commitment to equal opportunity, to young people as partners in learning and decision-making and to helping young people to develop their own sets of values’ (Davies, 1996), but whose work targets include getting a specified number of young people to take part in activities with accredited outcomes, may find it difficult to reconcile his or her beliefs with what has to be done. As a result, the contradiction experienced is not resolved.

Ball describes the tension that arises when professional values give way to the imperative of performativity as ‘structural and individual schizophrenia’ (2001:147) and suggests that it leads to ‘alienation of the self’ (*ibid*).

However, Ball suggests that this ‘splitting’ (*ibid*) can also lead to positive rewards within institutions that thrive on a ‘tick box’ work culture. This is consistent
with the students' accounts of being able to invoke different discourses to suit different audiences and situations with great success. They communicated with managers using a language that cohered with the dominant utilitarian view of Youth Work's purpose as 'keeping young people off the streets', reducing youth crime and maximising employability. On the other hand, they were able to eloquently exalt the virtues of Youth Work and the important role it had in society.

It was also evident, however, that they had uncritically adopted a utilitarian view of Youth Work, which was a significant departure from the ethical and professional principles of Youth Work which include, 'treating young people with respect' and 'respecting and promoting young people's rights to make their own decisions and choices' (NYA, 2004:6).

Coercing young people to take part in activities that help them develop competencies and dispositions that are in line with institutional agenda, no matter how socially desirable they maybe, does not constitute respecting their right to make choices about the things that matter to them. Helping young people stay out of trouble maybe a laudable pursuit, but whose interests are served by making this a priority aim of Youth Work? Engaging in Youth Work praxis involves raising questions such as this and considering the extent to which Youth Workers are agents of social control or agents of change. If the latter is true, then Youth Workers must work with young people to disrupt the negative portrayal of youth as either victims or villains.

**Conclusion**

As they entered the fieldwork practice space, many Youth Workers in formation were exposed to types of Youth Work practice that they found difficult to reconcile with the ethical and professional principles of Youth Work as they understood it. Their commitments to creating spaces for young people to participate freely in activities that facilitated their personal and social development were often destabilised by institutional imperatives to target and engage young people deemed 'at-risk' of social inclusion in pursuits that maximised their employability or curbed their criminal behaviours.

The prevalent focus on tangible outcomes within the wider employability discourse not only constrained the autonomy of Youth Workers to exercise their professional judgments, it also marked a significant departure from original conceptions of the nature and purposes of Youth Work. Some Youth Workers made complex negotiations to reduce the dissonance engendered by discrepancies between the ethical and professional principles of Youth Work and the models of practice they were forced to adopt. However, a living theory of Youth Work practice provides the scope to apply value commitments as critical standards of judgment, thereby minimizing 'living contradictions' in practice.
Références bibliographiques


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