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# The case for youth work

## 1. The nature of youth work

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What we now know as youth work emerged in the third quarter of the nineteenth century. By the end of that century such 'work among youth' had established its typical forms: the club, the uniformed troupe, the fellowship, and outreach to those not initially attracted to such groups. It had also gained its classic characteristics:

- Attention to the needs, experiences and contribution of young people.
- Workers who were able, in the later words of the McNair Report (1944), to be 'a guide, philosopher and friend to young people'. Much was dependent on their character and integrity.
- A focus on relationship and upon encouraging all to join together in friendship to organize and take part in groups and activities. This was often described as fostering fellowship and associational life.
- A concern to create moments for reflection and learning. When combined with the above it could be described as a process of friends educating each other.
- Working on the basis on choice. Young people could accept or reject the invitation to take part.

The purpose of the work was well summed up by the motto of the Oxford and Bermondsey Club in the early 1900s – *Fratres* (fraternity). It was also infused with Christian concern as the aim of the Time and Talents Guild (from the same period) makes clear: 'To seek through fellowship, prayer and service to bring the Spirit of Christ into every part of life'. The contemporary, secular interest in the cultivation of social capital and in the development of the whole person can be seen as standing in a direct line with these concerns.

## 2. State-sponsored youth work loses its way

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The last clear 'government' statements of youth work in its classic form can be found in the *Albemarle Report* (1960) and *Youth and Community Work in the 70s* (1969). The former famously talked about offering young people opportunities for association, training and challenge. Since then a number of factors have contributed to a significant drift away from youth work essentials within state-sponsored work. Here I just want to mention four. First, the parallel processes of secularization and professionalization within youth services has meant that links have been effectively cut with many of the ideals and practices of the social and religious movements that gave birth to, and remain by far the largest providers of, youth work. Youth service work became a job rather than a calling.

Second, state-sponsored services failed to respond to the changing experiences of young people and to shifts in society as a whole. In particular, it never really came to terms with extended education, the rise of the home as a centre of entertainment, and declining involvement in community and enthusiast groups.

Third, state-sponsored youth services became cautious, bureaucratized and managerial. This, in turn, further alienated many local voluntary groups. Much of the innovatory work of the 1980s and 1990s was based in the voluntary sector.

Fourth, in order to sustain funding youth services and national agencies increasingly made a case for their activities around the needs of 'problematic' young people. 'Issue-based' work became more the norm for such services. Their focus was further narrowed by movements in government policy and the use of targeted funding.

The result has been a movement into a more individualized, programmatic and accredited form of working. In many respects much of the work undertaken by state-sponsored youth services is better described as a conservative version of the north American tradition of youth development rather than youth work.

## 3. The renaissance in church-based and local youth work

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Since its inception youth work has overwhelmingly been undertaken by volunteers and workers in local groups. These groups, in turn, are part of national and international movements. Scouting and guiding provide a very visible and constant example of this. In recent years, however, two

important growth areas have emerged and which stand in line with the core concerns of youth work.

First, within many churches there has been a deepening and accelerating interest in work with young people. By 1998, the English Church Attendance Survey found that some 21 per cent of churches had a full-time salaried youth worker. This figure may have included some curates who had youth work as their prime responsibility - but it is nonetheless very significant. It suggests that at that time there were about 7,900 full-time youth workers in English churches - and that this comfortably exceeded the number of full-time workers employed by local authorities (3190). The Church had become the largest employer of youth workers in the country.

Second, and in part as a result of initiatives such as New Deal for Communities and the encouragement of tenant management there has been a growing interest in youth work by local community and tenants groups.

#### 4. The case for association and social capital

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While there are various difficulties and debates around concept of social capital its possession can have a very positive impact. For example, Putnam (*Bowling Alone* 2000) and others have been able to marshal an impressive amount of material to demonstrate that:

- Child development is powerfully shaped by social capital. Trust, networks, and norms of reciprocity within a child's family, school, peer group, and larger community have far reaching effects on their opportunities and choices, and hence on their behaviour and development (ibid.: 296-306)
- In high social-capital areas public spaces are cleaner, people are friendlier, and the streets are safer. Traditional neighbourhood "risk factors" such as high poverty and residential mobility are not as significant as most people assume. Places have higher crime rates in large part because people don't participate in community organizations, don't supervise younger people, and aren't linked through networks of friends. (ibid.: 307-318)
- A growing body of research suggests that where trust and social networks flourish, individuals, firms, neighbourhoods, and even nations prosper economically. Social capital can help to mitigate the insidious effects of socioeconomic disadvantage. (ibid.: 319-325)

- There appears to be a strong relationship between the possession of social capital and better health. ‘As a rough rule of thumb, if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year *in half*. If you smoke and belong to no groups, it’s a toss-up statistically whether you should stop smoking or start joining’ (ibid.: 331). Regular club attendance, volunteering, entertaining, or church attendance is the happiness equivalent of getting a college degree or more than doubling your income. Civic connections rival marriage and affluence as predictors of life happiness (ibid.: 333).

The World Bank has also brought together a range of statistics to make the case for the social and economic benefits of social capital. They also indicate some negative impacts, for example, when disgruntled local elites joined together to close health clinics in Uttar Pradesh. Child mortality rates soared as a result.

Social capital provides youth workers with a powerful contemporary rationale for their activities. As we have seen, the classic working environment for the youth worker is the group, club, church or community organization – and these settings are central to the generation of social capital within communities. That is to say they are primary means for cultivating social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. Several points need underlining here.

First, the simple act of joining and being regularly involved in organized groups has a very significant impact on individual health and well-being. Working so that people may join groups – whether they are organized around enthusiasms and interests, social activity, or economic and political aims – can make a considerable contribution in itself. Encouraging the development of associational life can also make a significant difference to the experience of being in different communities. Here we might highlight the case of schooling. Educational achievement is likely to rise significantly, and the quality of day-to-day interaction is likely to be enhanced by a much greater emphasis on the cultivation of extra-curricula activity involving groups and teams (in contrast to the curriculum-extension activities of homework ‘clubs’ and the like).

Second, youth work’s longstanding concern with association and the quality of life in associations can make a direct and important contribution to the development of social networks (and the relationships of trust and tolerance that is usually involved) and the strengthening of democracy.

Third, there is very strong argument here against those who wish to concentrate the bulk of resources on groups and individuals who present the strongest social problems. If we follow the analysis through then we can see that, for example, crime can be reduced, educational achievement enhanced and better health fostered through the strengthening of social capital. Significantly this entails working across communities – and in particular sustaining the commitment and capacities already involved in community organizations and enthusiast groups, and encouraging those on the cusp of being actively involved. The majority of the people we are talking about here cannot be classified as suffering from multiple disadvantage, will not be engaged in criminal activity, and will be (or have been) engaged with education systems and/or the world of work. In other words, open and generic work needs to be afforded a far higher priority – and so-called ‘issue-based’ work needs to be more closely interrogated as to the benefits it brings.

## 5. A policy for youth work

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So what should government involvement be in this area? It is clear that the fostering of social capital is of fundamental importance economically and socially. It is also clear that direct intervention by the state around social capital is problematic. As John Field has said (*Social Capital* 2003) it can only be built by engaging civil society - and helping to create the conditions for associational life. This includes funding some aspects of the work. There are some obvious steps that can be taken:

1. A significant amount of money needs to be put into local associations of youth groups to support the development and work of their member groups. This includes training workers and helpers, and providing opportunities to take part in different activities and to meet other groups.
2. Many groups, especially in areas where there is significant poverty – or where there is not a strong tradition of community organization - will continue to require state funding. Here special care needs to be taken to avoid the alienating effects of targets, intrusive monitoring, and an over-emphasis on paperwork. A revised version of grant-aid is required as is the abandonment of mechanisms such as service level agreements and contracts. Funding also needs to be available over a significant length of time if work is to be effective.
3. Particular attention needs to be given to enthusiast groups and the participation of young people within them. There is a case for grant aid to help groups to start and sustain

activities suitable for children and young people, and for support from youth workers.

4. Policies that require local groups to engage in the surveillance of, and reporting on, young people must be avoided. As must any attempt to impose or require adherence to the sorts of targets set out in *Transforming Youth Work*
5. Steps need to be taken to alleviate the bureaucratic and financial burdens of policies around child protection and safety. One obvious area here is the costs around CRB checks. Another concerns the cost of, and difficulties around, the insurance of different activities.
6. The cultivation of associational life in schools requires special attention.

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