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Co – Production: A Defence of Young People

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Abstract:

Recent years have seen fundamental and challenging changes in the delivery of services for young people. Outcomes, outputs and interventions have become the language of service evaluations, and allocation of funding creating an instrumental environment poorly equipped to respond to young people's developmental needs. The government's flagship National Citizenship Service on the other hand is funded to the equivalent of the former statutory youth budget, yet has been severely criticised by the Public Accounts Committee. It is time to work with young people to develop and champion services which respond to developmental need and young people's 'lived experiences', whilst respecting their role as co-producers of effective services.

Co-Production: A defence of young people.

A Finnish Professor of Education in conversation with Fulbright Scholar, Anthony Doyle stated “Our mission as adults is to defend the children from the politicians” . Here in the UK, we often look to Finland to take examples of what works, but this statement much more comprehensively sums up the issues we face in supporting young people through the transition to adulthood.

Recent years have seen fundamental and challenging changes in the delivery of services for young people. Outcomes, outputs and interventions have become the language of service evaluations, and allocation of funding creating an instrumental environment poorly equipped to respond to young people’s developmental needs.

At the same time, little progress has been made since Innocenti’s 2007 https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc7_eng.pdf State of the World’s Children Report, placing the UK firmly at the bottom of a table focussed on children and young people’s well-being indicators. Whilst recent reports seem to indicate some improvement, both the measures and list of comparator countries have changed, and the UKs young people remain more tested, more anxious, <https://www.atl.org.uk/latest/press-release/schoolchildrens-mental-health-serious-risk-atl> less listened to, less healthy, more likely to engage in excessive risks, http://pubhealth.oxfordjournals.org/content/34/suppl_1/i11.full than most other developed countries.

The UN Commission on Human Rights has long been critical of the UK’s approach to children and young people’s rights and the June 2016 country report, <https://www.scribd.com/document/316993267/UN-Report-UK-Human-Rights>

quite clearly identifies austerity measures as the cause of a number of breaches against the Human Rights Act, recommending that:

“the State party revise its policies and programmes introduced since 2010 and conduct a comprehensive assessment of the cumulative impact of these measures on the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups, in particular women, children and persons with disabilities”

A damning account which demands wider awareness and broad strategic examination in all three areas. This article examines the statement with particular reference to the developmental needs of adolescence. Whilst technology has undoubtedly changed the experience of childhood forever, developmental stages and need for association, experience, exploration and a sense of increasing responsibility and risk awareness remain constant. Who does not remember those stages of hiding, unseen but able to see, from parents and caregivers in clothing racks as a toddler, developing increasing independence and learning from climbing trees, falling off bicycles or sledging into rivers. Or, as a teenager, hanging out with friends, experimenting with the first cigarette, alcoholic drink and relationships. The teenage need to try new things and take risks so explicitly demonstrated by the well reported 'Bullingdon Club' <http://youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/youthandpolicy107.pdf> antics of several of our lawmakers responsible for restricting the same teenage freedoms for others in the form of dispersal orders, curfews and the ubiquitous and painful 'mosquito', all so widely in use that first year undergraduates report having experienced one or more of these measures. Add to this the constant change to curriculum and dismissal of arts and humanities subjects by successive education ministers, and the much needed opportunity for teenagers to explore new ideas en route to developing a secure identity is restricted. Transition to adulthood is itself further complicated for those without financial means in the removal of Housing Benefit, and right to the Living Wage for the under 25s.

Further examination of policies implemented since 2010, and indeed before, reveal the by product of academisation and private finance initiatives of schools and colleges has been the removal of cost – effective directed use lettings arrangements. This, together with the demise of community venues has led to the diminution of safe developmental spaces for young people. At the same time, the 2012 reduction of statutory responsibilities for Local Authorities to provide services for young people <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmeduc/744/74408.htm> and consequent refocus of the equivalent of the entire statutory Youth Service Budget <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2014/07/On-line-Catalogue225322.pdf> into the cost selective, business model of the 3-4 week National Citizenship Service for 15 -17 year olds <http://www.ncsthechallenge.org> has enforced a professional discourse much more focused on intervention than development, - paradoxically, the lack of developmental support, creating greater need, and, in today's context, market, for intervention services such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services which are regularly reported as 'overwhelmed'. In her recent 'shared society' speech, the Prime Minister has announced that the National Citizenship Service will become a 'rite of passage' for all teenagers whilst potentially a valuable experience a short term required programme is a long way from a responsive service supporting developmental need and transitions.

Many solutions are being suggested, but the growing moral panic about our teenagers, and

move towards targeted work and intervention have created a focus more on approaching separate issues, - mental health, crime, anti-social behaviour, low attainment, under-achieving groups, instead of a holistic approach to young people's rights and development. In this context focussing on specific types of work runs the risk of continued diversion of developmental support work with young people and sustaining the instrumental model of short – term interventions.

It is in this context that co-production with young people has developed from the models used in Community Development since the seventies. With a focus on dialogue and empowering participants to take the lead in developing and delivering positive social change, it could be argued that co-production is at the heart of Community Development processes, and has been used in service development in Health, Education, Crime Reduction and Housing. Co– production itself may be covered by a range of terms, and, having been undertaken largely outside of the mainstream has not been researched in any detail.

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/9781859354674.pdf>

Civic engagement and active participation are clearly linked to community and individual well-being (Prilleltensky 2006), the development and maintenance of both social and cultural capital. Developmental outcomes in terms of transformational learning, self-confidence, self -esteem and ability to engage effectively with social and work contexts are all highly relevant in Youth Work. The co–production model developed through the early noughties with a range of projects led by the New Economics Foundation and evaluated by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation using peer researchers offers an overview of these core processes which are at the heart of developmental Youth Work. The evaluation also highlights highlight some of the same pitfalls and challenges:

“there also seems to be a danger that the whole concept could be subsumed into a more utilitarian public service agenda, aimed at reducing expenditure and the efficient pursuit of targets. This would undermine the human-scale nature of co-production, and the ability to define as assets almost any human capability.”

Similarly, the role of the professional in co–production often requires a shift in perspective and reflects the renewed relevance of the debate within Youth Work of young people as ‘creators or consumers’:

“their basic task must shift from being fixers who focus entirely on problems to catalysts who focus on abilities”

From 2009 to 2014 the Mental Health Foundation developed Right Here Projects in Brighton and Hove, Fermanagh, the London Borough of Newham, and Sheffield, with the aim of “exploring how mental health-informed youth work might deliver distinctive outcomes for

young people that may not be delivered by traditional NHS services.” The programme evaluation <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/projects/right-here/how-can-mental-health-informed-youth-work-help-young-people/> clearly outlines a range of developmental benefits for the young people involved. In addition, the mainstreaming of more young people friendly services, and greater awareness of both mental health issues and their incidence amongst young people and the wider population were highlighted. Challenges were identified in maintaining high levels of genuine co – production and service development and in removing blockages to communication in terms of the power dynamics between professionals and young people who were not necessarily engaging I services voluntarily. At the heart of effective services were effective relationships based on trust and respect – a direct link to the core values and skills of Youth Work.

Jeffs (2015) describes a ‘rump’ of statutory youth work funding, and the persistent damage of the decoupling from the Department of Education, in late 2016 this was exacerbated by the move to the Department for Culture media and Sport, fundamentally indicating a belief in Youth Work as leisure as a ‘keeping them occupied and off the streets’ or even worse, using NCS as ‘rite of passage’ (May 2017), and a clear statement of a policy focus on ‘character – building’ in conferences on the NCS being developed by the parliament – driven Westminster Forum. The rhetoric could not be further from recognizing g developmental need. The challenge for youth work professionals and those who train them is to cohesively advocate and develop empowering projects which both involve young people in the design and delivery of services, and demonstrate the clear misconceptions about value for public money surrounding NCS.

Informal work with young people has a long and varied history, but it is built on voluntary relationships built on trust and respect. The focus has always been on key elements of developmental needs: the need to support an emerging identity, the need for association, the need for informed advice, the need to try new things, the need for specialist support when things might go wrong or have gone wrong. Clearly co – production has a role to play in meeting these needs, but there is a danger of creating a separate strand of work for a process which should rather represent an integral part of effective work with young people. The needs outlined above were historically catered for in community-based, often school - based safe developmental spaces for young people to meet, to engage in a wide range of activities, AND regularly undertake residential experiences of the kind offered by NCS. There is one major difference to then and now - whilst there is no cost benefit to the refocus to NCS which has supported only 275 000 young people through the programme since its start (Public Accounts Committee 2017), those safe developmental spaces along with preventative support have quietly all but disappeared, and with them long term support, often from ages 7 – 20+. Support offered through a voluntary relationship with

consistent adults in the form of multi – skilled youth professionals – ‘animateurs’, informal educators with ‘triage’ counselling skills, with freely available informed information and guidance. In these safe developmental spaces, young people would be enabled to take charge of running the services on offer. Management activities such as ‘the Thing’ at the Warren in Hull, (Fitzsimons 2011) would ensure young people were the drivers of service provision. Multi – skilled youth workers and specialist instructors would enable opportunities from the arts to the outdoors or simply be there to engage in important non judgemental and informed conversations with young people. One of the core elements of Youth Work, the voluntary relationship is being lost in the march to targeted intervention and referral and this brings with it an inevitable shift in the nature of the relationship, reducing the potential for young people to freely express themselves. At the same time a range of terms have been used in recent years ‘Voice and Influence’, ‘Participation’, ‘Youth Voice’, ‘Youth Panels’, ‘Young Advisers’, ‘Youth Parliament’ and have all too often become separate, potentially less cost effective strands of work, rather than the historically more embedded commitment to ‘empowering work with young people’ meeting young people’s developmental needs for increasing autonomy and independence and encouraging political literacy and civic awareness. This shift embodies both the challenge and the opportunity offered by the emerging role of co-production in Youth Work.

For those professionals grounded in Youth Work as a core element of Community Development, it is quite likely that co- production is both embedded in their work, perhaps under another name, and linked to other services. In England in particular, where services have become increasingly fragmented and interventionist, with tightly controlled budgets, this is increasingly challenging. The biggest obstacle is the competitive contract – driven nature of services against a financially uncertain backdrop which turns potential partners into competitors, and policy makers into potential commissioners. With a little creativity, however, co– production can be developed as part of a participatory evaluation and reflective learning. The New Economics Foundation http://b.3cdn.net/nefoundation/3bf3d0d37f59967672_s4m6ivqnu.pdf has trialled co production as evaluation and service development in Lambeth and Cornwall, and there is potential to expand this still further with joined up advocacy. Community Development processes clearly recognise the role of the professional in advocacy, in ensuring that the views of the community are heard and taken into account in policy contexts, and it is in developing a cohesive localised approach to bringing young people’s experiences and developmental needs as well as their views on individual services to policy makers that co - production could really make a difference. This does mean taking a step back and taking a more expansive look at the ‘lived experiences’ (Freire 1997) of young people in the UK today and developing partnership approaches to community – wide co –production of young people’s perspectives on growing up in a particular place. Universities and Colleges training professionals working with young people have a potentially key role to play in co-

ordinating annual or biannual snapshots of young people's life experiences, hopes and challenges at different ages. Involving students in a relevant peer research programmes during placements offers both a significant learning opportunity for the students in understanding young people, research and effective evaluation, and the potential to reach a significant randomised sample of young people, developing a you said we did approach to services across commissioning areas. In making sure young people's experiences and voices are rigorously collated and represented effectively to local decision – makers a much needed drive for policy and service development to be based on a contemporary and relevant response to developmental need, with young people's active participation in an ongoing cycle of design and review.

The reduction of universal services does represent a significant challenge in reintegrating empowerment and co-production into those services which remain. Largely financed with very defined targets and content, ensuring young people are fully involved in the development and design of services is difficult. With informal learning as a core field of practice, young people's reflections on their development represent both a core element of youth work processes, and a powerful message to funders. Including case studies and young people's biographies in reports and publicity is a vital advocacy role in maintaining the core developmental process of young people. In reflecting on their development and participation, young people are naturally also commenting on the accessibility, effectiveness and range of services available to them. When visiting Youth Work students on placement, this is often the source of some frustration, as young people are very clear in what works and does not work for them in service design and accessibility. It is in this area which the training organisations in an area have a significant role to play. In developing a biographical, life history approach to researching young people's hopes and challenges across a particular locality or area, they can play an important advocacy role in canvassing for effective and expanded service provision.

It is in developing a cohesive voice for young people, and focusing on developmental need that co-production can become most powerful. Jaquet et al (2015) quite clearly identify the benefits of Universal Youth Work in terms of developmental support and well – being. This is the open access meeting space with support from professional youth workers able to offer 'triage counselling' where necessary, and access to a full range of activities which engage and celebrate young people and the 'art of the possible'. The challenge is to demonstrate the cost benefits to governments across the UK in a way which will present a compelling argument to reinvest in our young people. The 2011 evaluation of NCS pilots recognized a unit cost of £1 303 to government and £1 553 in total for 16-17 year olds undertaking a 3 week residential experience, by 2016 the Public Accounts Committee has raised this by 20% to £1863. Before Public Finance Initiatives, School based youth services

were able to operate 5-6 evenings a week with between 50 and 100 young people attending both as a safe space to meet, and with access to sports and specialist art facilities at a minimal cost. Staffed generally by one full time Youth Worker and locally trained, Level 2 -3 qualified workers offering a range of skills and activities such as art, music, sport, adventurous activities and potentially Duke of Edinburgh's Award, Arts Award for young people who were interested. Junior Youth Activities meant that services were available from potentially 7 years old with young people taking leadership roles. Most would offer a series of residential experiences far in excess of the 3 weeks offered by NCS, and not as a potentially mistimed 'rite of passage', but as a developmental process where older young people often managed activities and centres themselves, placing co-production and empowerment at the heart of developmental youth work. In addition, in universal services working with young people and their communities, civic action, fundraising, and volunteering were all embedded in programmes and opportunities. Staffing costs at today's rates¹ for 38 weeks with 60 hours of part time staff giving 15 2.5 sessions would amount to around £80k, directed use would have been at cost, or at a small profit often kept by the school although technically belonging to the Local Authority. Whilst a number of open access provisions continue to exist, maintaining revenue is a struggle, and the long – term planning which runs hand in hand with responding to developmental need is difficult with short – term funding. These options gradually disappeared through the period of extended schools in the late noughties and 'academisation'. General costs are difficult to find, but the links to schools still offering community use included as an appendix suggest that today £600 weekly would give access to sports and creative facilities in addition to halls or studios large enough to house a Youth Club. Total annual cost £100 000 -120 000, for local access to support, activities, residential experiences throughout the transitions and challenges of adolescence – with a membership of 100, small subscriptions are enough to cover equipment and some trip costs. Such a venue would cost in the region of £1200 each, a potential 30% saving to the public purse per young person, and, as a result of improved well-being, triage counselling, support through transitions further significant savings in intervention services allowing them to focus on those young people whose 'polarity of experience' is challenging and chaotic, and providing professional support through the inevitable 'bumps in the road' .

Clearly, there is a financial case to be made, and one with some urgency, the Audit Commission (2017) have reported that the costs need to be reduced by 29% by 2019, and have wasted £10 million on unfilled places in 2016. Similarly, the Public Accounts Committee (2017) has already started to ask questions, and identified that a four year weekly meeting with the scouts and associated residential only costs the public purse £550 per young person, whilst failing to recognize the vital role of volunteers in keeping the service operational at a low cost. A wider debate needs to be driven before these delivery

¹ Estimate using current JNC Scales for mid – range Level 2/3 worker, and Youth Support Workers.

questions become a reason to cut the funding. The report notes that:

“Between 2014–15 and 2016–17, the Trust received around £475 million of taxpayers’ money, 99% of its forecast income.⁴⁹ Given this dependence on public funds we questioned the Trust’s lack of transparency in, for example, not disclosing individual directors’ salary and pension contribution figures in its published accounts.”

£475 million equates to potentially 475 000 open access venues across the country, with the removal of Public Finance Restrictions to the use of schools, less, but still evidently more effective using community buildings and associated costs. It is clear that the management of the NCS Trust has expanded significantly with national recruitment agencies, and marketing taking significant funds away from young people, and as a structure, it is not the most cost effective. It is also apparent that 92% of participants are sixth formers, and that the trust is finding difficulty in demonstrating long – term impact. Claims of the ‘NCS difference’ are entirely focussed on social mix, which the Scouts Association is clearly able to do at jamboree, and which local Youth Services are also able to do through a range of cross service initiatives. There is no doubt that intensive residential experiences promote teamwork and cooperation, but claims in terms of supporting the developmental transition to adulthood in a three week period are spurious. The already demonstrable range of outcomes and benefits from universal youth work further adds to the value for money case to be made – ideally before the NCS Bill is passed into law, and Charter Status is granted.

The Scouts Association has already made representations, but a national cohesive voice involving young people, professionals and communities could make a significant difference at a time when the main service provider is under scrutiny. It is time for us all to build on existing example of co –production in commissioning, or specialist services, empowering, dialogic youth work, and to ask the young people we work with what they see as the most effective services for them, to present them with the realities of NCS and possibilities of diverting funding to local services, and to work with them in developing compelling arguments for services which fully recognise the developmental challenges of adolescence.

Our mission, as professionals, is indeed to defend the children and young people from the politicians, as experts, committed to recognising young people’s lived experiences, to work together to advocate for developmental rights and demand that policy is borne from a recognition of young people’s voice, their needs for association and opportunities to try new things, a commitment to enabling growth, development and successful transition to adulthood, not a quick fix, or target driven, reactive intervention.

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