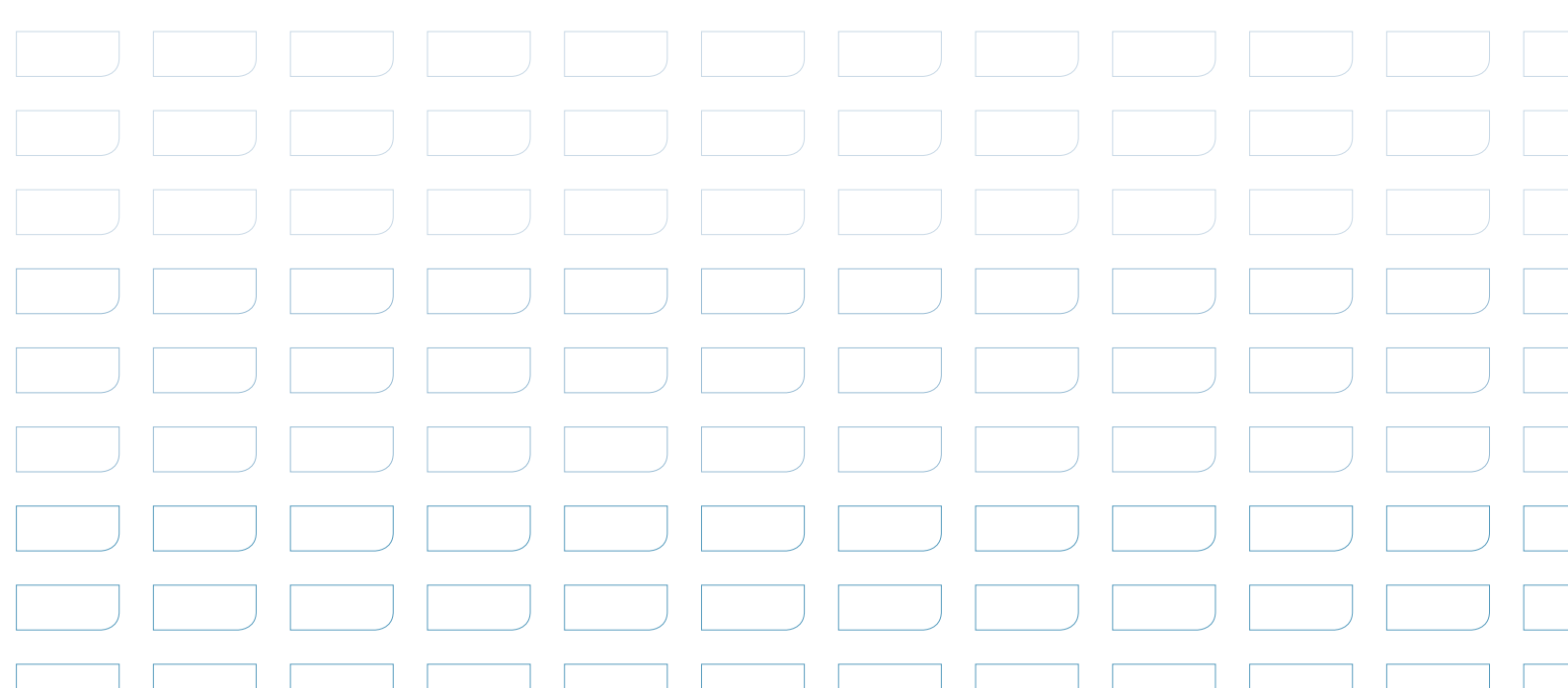


Youth Work: *A Manifesto* Revisited - at the time of Covid and beyond

Bernard Davies, 2021



Youth and Policy are delighted to have published Bernard Davies' original Manifesto for Youth Work in 2005 as well as his revised version in 2015. Here, Davies has once more reconsidered the context in which open youth work is forced to operate. In this 2021 version of his Manifesto for Youth Work, he considers what has changed since previous versions of the Manifesto were published and locates his discussion of youth work's defining features in the current political context, and the struggles and opportunities for youth work at this time. Rather than offering a prescribed formula for how youth work should be, Davies once more, in the spirit of an improvisatory and critical practice, offers this paper as a starting point for further discussion and debate among youth workers.

In the decade and a half in which the two previous versions of 'Youth Work: A Manifesto for our Times' appeared (Davies, 2005; Davies, 2015a), those 'times'—and particularly the state policies which framed them—have become history. This second revision of the *Manifesto* therefore offers an opportunity not just to update policy contexts which now read as out-of-date scene-setters. It also allows a retrospective critical look at those past policies, not least to explore why open youth work still struggles to find a secure place within national and local youth provision. Doing this in the middle of 2021 also prompts some (albeit still tentative) reflection on the possible impacts on youth work, of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Over the past fifteen years the *Manifesto* has not, of course, been the only attempt to explain and advocate for youth work as a distinctive practice. Particularly important here too, for example—though now perhaps not always getting the emphasis they merit—have been the 'cornerstones' set out in the In Defence of Youth Work's launch letter circulated in March 2009 (IDYW, 2009).

Feedback from 'the field', however—from practitioners, managers, youth work students and tutors as well as from some policy-makers—suggests that the *Manifesto*'s practice-focused sections are still being used to help encourage debate on that always debateable question: 'So what is youth work?' These sections are also in need of review, however—particularly to engage with the increasing use of the term 'open youth work' and its emphases on the practice's openness to young people engaging and leaving as they wish and to setting starting points, timescales, content and hoped-for outcomes which they prioritise (See Doherty & de St Croix, 2019).

Policy in 2005...

The first *Manifesto* acknowledged that, going back to the mid-1990s, both Conservative and Labour governments had committed significant public resources to 'youth services' (lower case). The paper listed a number of (mostly time-limited) programmes, schemes and projects whose aims included reducing teenage offending, drug misuse and unplanned pregnancies; re-engaging 'NEET' young people in education, training or employment; improving support for school leavers—particularly those labelled as 'vulnerable'; and helping to prevent 'race riots' by focussing on developing greater 'social cohesion'.

Though these initiatives were described as having 'ratcheted up' expectations of youth work, this claim had to be seen in the context of a largely taken-for-granted assumption that the main (perhaps the only) reason for its public funding was to help combat 'youth problems'. By being turned into something it wasn't—a 'targeted' intervention sometimes requiring young people's participation—youth work was in danger, the *Manifesto* suggested, of being set up to fail and so ending up even less credible with policy-makers and funders. Hence the dilemma posed in its opening question: 'Has youth work ever been more fashionable—or at greater risk?'

The response at the heart of that first *Manifesto*—indeed its whole rationale—was thus a reassertion of what it described as some 'bottom-line youth work's positions' and in particular its historic commitments to young people's voluntary engagement, to developmental aims for individuals and their peer groups, and to approaches rooted in the traditions of informal education.

...and in 2015

By the time the 2015 *Manifesto* was being drafted — that is, halfway through the now infamous ‘austerity decade’ — the threat to state-supported youth work was not so much that it was being re-engineered into something it wasn’t but that the cuts to national and local authority budgets were putting its very survival at risk. In 2018, a YMCA survey found that by then, in England, Youth Service spending since 2010–11 had fallen in real terms by £959 million — that is, by 71 per cent (YMCA, 2020). Research by the trade union UNISON concluded that by 2019, across the UK, over 4,500 youth work posts would have been lost and more than 750 youth centres closed, suggesting that more than 140,000 places for young people may have disappeared (Unison, 2016; Unison, 2018). And all that at a time when 95 per cent of central government spending on ‘youth services’ was committed to the National Citizens Service (Puffett, 2018).

By the end of the decade, Parliamentary committees were highlighting the resultant damage to young people’s lives and indeed to society more widely, prompting some cautious proposals for reinstating state funding for local Youth Service facilities (See for example, the All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs, 2019). And yet, though differing in some of its detail from the 2005 policies outlined earlier, the rationale often remained unchanged: that youth work was needed, not primarily as a developmental offer to young people to be taken up by choice, but in order to ‘target’ youth problems now increasingly prioritised such as knife crime and deteriorating mental health.

Responses such as these were underpinned by another much broader continuity: the neo-liberal ideas which for decades had been shaping youth and many wider government policies. Indeed, the 2015 *Manifesto* confronted the absence from its 2005 version of any explicit discussion of these ideas, pointing for example to how ‘imposed notions of competitive and market-driven public services’ had long shaped New Labour’s overall conception of ‘modernisation’. These policies, the 2015 *Manifesto* also noted, had had ‘profoundly negative consequences for youth work’. These stemmed especially, it suggested, from

‘... repeated and major bouts of organisational restructuring and ... demands for a practice which, through stringent forms of managerialist control, would demonstrate it was achieving ‘hard’ (ie. statistically measured) “outcomes” with the “risky” and the “at risk”’. (Davies, 2015a: 4)

Following the 2008 global banking crisis, governments presented their ongoing demolition of public services as an economic necessity. Deeply embedded within it, however, as in all government policies at the time, were familiar and largely unchallenged neo-liberal tropes. One of the most prominent and persistent was a demeaning portrayal of the state as a direct provider of public services — used particularly to justify contracting these out to the private sector via complex tendering and commissioning procedures. These policies also had damaging impacts on purportedly ‘independent’ voluntary organisations, increasingly sucked into often highly competitive relationships with their wider field and into endorsing the values and ideas underpinning these.

Policy in 2021 — and beyond?

Though pandemic damage has forced some breaks with neo-liberal policies, the ideas themselves have come under little if any serious government scrutiny. At best, ministers — with devoted apologist, the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the lead — have responded pragmatically to economic and social disruptions too big even for them to deny. Perhaps most significantly, by mid-2020 they had had to accept — albeit largely implicitly and reluctantly — that, in a highly complex society like ours, only the central state and the public institutions it supports have the capacity and resources for anything approaching an adequate response to the crisis.

In ways which are still having significant financial and other impacts, however, those underpinning neo-liberal assumptions remain dominant. By March 2021, for example, with minimum transparency or accountability, the government had spent at least £375m on private consultancy services for Covid-19 test and trace. Though these were widely condemned for being far less effective than the NHS-run vaccination programme (Harvey, 2021), they were reported to be employing 2,500 consultants at an estimated daily rate of around £1,100 with

some being paid more than £6,000 a day (ITV News, 2021). One of the beneficiaries of this outsourcing of NHS services was the multi-national corporation, Serco. By June 2021, it was predicting that its profits would rise by 50 per cent in the first half of the year helped by one government contract forecast eventually to be worth £410 million (Jolly, 2021, Partridge 2021).

It is in the context of these wasted resources that we hit a second policy reality left over from the austerity decade—one with very direct implications for state-supported youth work. Between 2009–10 and 2018–19, the Treasury’s financial support for local authorities in England was cut by 38 per cent—from £34.6 billion to £24.8 billion (Institute for Government, 2021). Even after £9.1 billion of ‘emergency help’, pandemic demands between March and December 2020 widened this funding gap by a further £600 million. As a result, by March 2021, at least twenty-five local councils were regarded as on the brink of bankruptcy with 94 per cent expected to cut spending in 2021–22 to meet their legal duty to balance their budgets (Butler, 2021; Simpson, 2021b). By July 2021, the Institute for Fiscal Studies was forecasting a possible additional cut to public services of £17 billion (Partington, 2021).

A bottom-up perspective of the pandemic’s impacts is, unsurprisingly, equally challenging, with many youth work projects reporting serious financial threats to their longer-term future. In November 2020, with much of the pandemic still to run, a UK Youth survey of over 1,750 organisations revealed that, just as 66 per cent were facing increased demand (described by 32 per cent as ‘significant’), 58 per cent were operating at a reduced level. Eighty-three per cent had seen their funding fall since the pandemic began, 44 per cent were forecasting a shortfall between income and expenditure in 2021–22 and 64 per cent said they were at risk of closing. A further 20 per cent were already closed temporarily or preparing to close permanently, while many that were surviving had had to furlough frontline staff, move them to other work or make them redundant (UK Youth, 2021).

2021: Why a *Manifesto*?

Despite these significant shifts in the wider policy contexts, in key respects the rationale for offering a *Manifesto* for youth work in 2021 remains broadly the same as it did in 2005 and 2015: the need for practitioners in particular and the youth work field more broadly to be clear, confident and articulate in explaining what makes their way of working with young people needed—and distinctive. This emerges as particularly important, too, given that many who identify as youth workers still find themselves having to take on other kinds of ‘youth’ roles.

This *Manifesto* aspiration, however, comes as before with cautions. One is that by making the case for the practice’s distinctiveness I am *not* suggesting that it is superior to other ‘youth’ practices—to what, say, a skilled teacher can do in the classroom or care worker in a residential home. Nor, secondly, is it to deny the potential added value for young people of the ‘approaches’ and ‘skills’ a youth worker might bring to other settings—even allowing for the question: are these really as exclusive to youth work as is sometimes claimed? And thirdly, it is important to recognise that what often is on offer in many self-defined ‘youth work’ organisations may be very different from how the practice is conceptualised in this *Manifesto*. Indeed, far from being treated as some final ‘set-in-stone’ statement of position, that conceptualisation needs anyway to be treated as a further contribution to the debate on the long-contested meaning of youth work.

Despite these qualifications, this *Manifesto*, like the earlier ones, quite deliberately presents that distinctiveness in an assertive way because, as a *Manifesto* should, it seeks to lay down some clear bottom-lines. It does this partly with those in mind—referred to earlier—who, often in powerful positions outside youth work, have sought to redirect and reshape the practice to meet their priorities. Equally unashamedly, however, it aims also to concentrate minds within youth work on what still—albeit perhaps for some different, and at this ‘Covid’ moment, additional reasons—needs, clearly and boldly, to be articulated in defence of that practice.

This purist position is thus retained for the same three reasons set out in the 2015 paper:

1. Far from being a pick-and-mix collection of skills available for selective transfer into other ‘youth practices’, youth work—while working closely with these other practices as necessary—needs to be understood and accepted as a practice in its own right, with characteristics which, in combination, give it an overall coherence, identity and potential.
2. For this practice to be available, settings are required which themselves have crucial defining features: as a minimum, that—as well as being self-chosen by young people to use in their discretionary (leisure) time—they offer an ethos which for them is welcoming, comfortable and *fun*, and which can be substantially shaped by what *they* expect and want.
3. Evidence—frequently updated—is available that a significant minority of young people have been making this choice for decades and, assuming the spaces are there, would wish to go on doing that. In 2013, for example, the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services reported that over 9 per cent of UK 10–15 year olds were using a youth club most days of the week and, further, nearly 29 per cent at least once a week (National Council for Voluntary Youth Services, 2013). With, by 2019, the 10–15 year old age-group totalling around 4 million (Statista, 2019), up to 1.5 million young people might therefore by then have been making regular use of a youth work facility—and that is before use by the 15+ age group is taken into account. More recent research has also again confirmed that for significant proportions of users their engagement with youth workers has brought (self-defined) gains, many of which they see as unavailable via other ‘services’ (See, for example Bawden, 2020; Thompson and Woodger, 2020; Ord et al, 2021).

By the time this was being written in mid-2021, however, a fourth argument for a ‘purist’ assertion of youth work’s core features had emerged, needing to be addressed early—and very directly. Somewhat paradoxically it was prompted by the often hugely committed and imaginative ways

in which—despite all those additional financial constraints outlined earlier—face-to-face workers have responded to the increased pressures being felt by many young people because of the pandemic (See, for example Simpson, 2021a; Lepper, 2021; Thomas, 2021). As well as using, and in places extending, well-trying outreach and detached approaches, many of these workers have adopted—indeed developed—‘remote’ methods which have enabled them to sustain and even, in places, reach beyond their existing relationships (See for example Batsleer et al, 2020–21).

However, some of the core features of youth work set out in this *Manifesto* may again have been put at risk (albeit unintentionally) by the very creativity of these responses. This risk was perhaps captured earlier in the year by a question posed by the Department of Digital, Media, Culture and Sport on one of its ‘youth review’ feedback forms:

‘What role does digital provision have in delivering services for young people?’. (DMCS, 2021)

It seems also to be reflected in a recent suggestion by the Chief Executive of the National Citizens Service—that, even with a reduced budget, the scheme’s future strategy should include

‘...greater opportunities for ... digital support on issues including mental health and resilience...’. (Simpson, 2021c)

Coming as these suggestions do from top-down policy-makers, some with a long track record of diverting youth work from its relationship-centred aspirations, we surely need to be aware of another possible question lurking within them: that as these new (relatively cheap) ‘remote’ ways of engaging with young people seem to be working so well, why in the future will we need all those (costly) buildings and all those (labour-intensive) face-to-face methods?

For countering this albeit still speculative proposition, as well as for responding positively to all those other youth work doubters, this *Manifesto*’s unapologetic presentation of what constitutes open youth work will hopefully offer a relevant and helpful starting point.

Searching out youth work's distinctive identity

What above was called the 'purist position' of this paper asserts that, for youth work to be on offer, positive answers are needed to the following questions:

- > Is the practice taking place in 'open access' settings to which young people have chosen to come and which can they can choose to leave—that is, is their participation voluntary?
- > Is the practice proactively seeking to tip balances of power in their favour?
- > Are young people perceived and received as young people rather than through a filter of adult-imposed labels?
- > Is the practice starting where young people are starting, particularly with their expectation that they will be able to relax, meet friends and enjoy themselves?
- > Is one key focus of the practice on the young person as an individual?
- > Is the practice respectful of and actively responsive to young people's peer networks?
- > Is the practice respectful of and actively responsive to young people's wider collective community and cultural identities and, where young people choose, is it seeking to help them strengthen these?
- > Is the practice seeking to go beyond where young people start, in particular by encouraging them to develop their personal potential and be critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them?
- > Is the practice concerned with how young people feel as well as with what they know and can do?

Interrogating practice: towards a clarification of youth work's defining features

Is the practice taking place in 'open access' settings to which young people have chosen to come and which can they can choose to leave—that is, is their participation voluntary?

Since the first *Manifesto* appeared, interpretations of 'voluntary participation' have on occasions been a focus of a healthy debate in youth work circles (see, for example, Williamson, 2007: 38; Ord, 2016: 88–97). As outlined earlier, however, its relevance has been challenged more widely as even key players within the youth work field have collapsed 'youth work' into any form of 'work with young people', including ones which require, or even legally compel, attendance. In these circumstances, it has become increasingly urgent to reassert young people's participation in self-chosen 'open access' settings as a—perhaps the—defining feature of practice which claims 'youth work' as its title.

In this context, 'setting' does not just refer to buildings such as youth clubs, youth centres, drop-in centres and cafés which have been specially provided to attract young people in their leisure time. It also includes spaces where young people congregate spontaneously, without any prior adult endorsement, and into which, on young people's terms, detached and outreach workers seek to negotiate some right of entry and ongoing contact. At least implicitly, all this also assumes that workers in these settings will not just tolerate young people's voluntary participation but will embrace it as an integral—again, defining and positive—element of their relationships with young people.

Nor, as has sometimes been suggested, is the rationale for this position just theoretical or ideological—'conservative' or bloody-minded youth workers holding onto a belief which has passed its sell-by date. Rather, it is a position with both deep historical roots and a continuing pragmatic rationale. From the earliest days of 'youth leadership', even its powerful and often evangelical 'pioneers' accepted that 'in the first place the boys had to be persuaded to come...' (Russell and Rigby, 1908: 18).

More immediately, 'the voluntary principle' continues to ensure that, in their dealings with the institutions which provide youth work and in their relationships

with the practitioners who deliver it face-to-face, young people retain a degree of power. Though the action may never be framed in this way by either adult or young person, each knows that at any point the young person, simply by walking away, can leave the adult powerless in the relationship. This unusual feature of our society's public provision for young people is perhaps one hidden explanation of why youth work in the long neo-liberal era has been so out of favour with politicians, policy-makers and even some funders. The young person's sense of power may be limited, and to some degree negative, in the sense that attendance at a youth work facility may be the least worst option available in a neighbourhood. Nonetheless, it exists because of the role and the status structured into the exchanges between user and provider.

Because of this balance of power, youth workers have no choice but to negotiate their way into their relationships with the young people they meet. Nor can this just be a 'tactical' manoeuvre focused on easing the young people through tedious pre-set tasks necessary for achieving more rewarding outcomes (as it may need to be in teaching for example). The youth work negotiation has to be part of a built-in, authentic and reciprocated give-and-take, sustained throughout the young person-adult engagement. Only then are the young people likely to exercise their power in favour of staying long enough to become exposed to the educational opportunities which youth work might offer—and in doing so sustain a personally committed participation rather than a merely compliant attendance.

The voluntary principle also impacts significantly on the content of what is on 'offer'. Because young people engage in youth work 'in their own' time', youth work proceeds on the presumption that it must deliver returns which young people value in their own right, on their terms. Moreover, and integrally linked with the requirement to negotiate, these returns need to be valued by the young people in the here-and-now, or at least pretty soon, and not just as a promise of some later gain. Given the terms on which young people attend, youth workers cannot assume that gratification too long delayed is an option—of the kind, for example, which many school students settle for on the promise (even less credible in a post-pandemic era) that hard work today on syllabi experienced as 'irrelevant' will eventually bring tradable qualifications and well-paid jobs.

The voluntary principle has significant implications, too, for the 'hidden curriculum'. With potentially significant impacts on motivation and learning, this of course also exists within those interpersonal exchanges between teacher and student. In these wider educational environments, however, it will often—perhaps usually—remain hidden, or at least be treated as secondary to the real business of getting through that syllabus. By contrast, in youth work, such process questions have to be addressed openly and directly. This is partly because learning experientially about people and their relationships is so central to youth work's overt 'curriculum'. It is important too, however, because any youth worker who patronises, rides roughshod over or simply ignores the views or feelings of the young people they meet, is liable to find themselves without a clientele. More positively, this is often what young people point to explicitly as especially valuable in their encounters with youth workers:

'They treat you like adults'. (Davies and Merton, 2009: 11)

'They don't judge you... They don't stand over you and give out to you'. (Devlin and Gunning, 2009: 41)

'The youth workers understand about my learning difficulties. They always support me but allow me freedom as well'. (Fyfe et al, 2018: 16-17).

Many of those youth workers now working in non-youth work settings face an additional challenge: the need to convert young people's reluctant or enforced attendance into a form of 'voluntary' (or at least less compliant) participation. In the process, as was suggested earlier, they may be able to add significantly to the value of the experience of the young people involved. For a much bigger constituency of young people, however, none of this can be a substitute for the open access provision to which they come voluntarily, over whose style and content they have some genuine leverage and whose distinctive benefits are often only achievable because of the more equal power relationships between adult and young person.

Is the practice proactively seeking to tip balances of power in young people's favour?

As the discussion above has highlighted, for youth workers the centrality of 'the voluntary principle' makes a confrontation with questions of power—who has it and how is it used—unavoidable. For many policy-makers and youth agencies, such questions are now highly fashionable as they express aspirations of tapping into 'young people's voice', often by providing some (carefully bounded and controlled) 'participation' programmes (see Davies, 2020).

However, for the youth worker, such goals are not incidental luxuries—the icing on the cake—while implementing them is often not achieved through committees or other formal machinery. Rather, they are pursued through the workers' everyday routine exchanges with the young people who turn up: exchanges whose built-in power balances mean that, from day one and throughout, they have to be shaped by 'participatory' principles and the mutuality of respect and influence which these assume.

The power which young people actually exercise within the youth work relationship is, of course, relative. It is relative, still, to the degree of formal power (for example, over money, buildings and equipment) which remains with the youth worker. And, even more significantly, it is relative to young people's very limited formal power, sometimes coming close to powerlessness, in other spheres of their lives—at home, within education more widely, within employment and (unless they have real money in their pockets) even in their leisure. Indeed, despite the many high-profile official (and often implicitly patronising) initiatives to foster their 'empowerment', the fundamental shifts over the past three to four decades in their structural, and especially economic, position in the labour market, the benefit system, the housing market, even now higher education, have very substantially *weakened* their control over key aspects of their lives. As was suggested earlier, this weakness has now been both further exposed and indeed exacerbated by the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Youth work's commitment to tipping these balances in young people's favour needs to be seen in this contemporary context. But it has to be understood, too, in a much broader way: explained bluntly as 'young people are citizens now'. Though

apparently a simple notion, this needs to be asserted uncompromisingly at a time when so many current policies assume that, just because they (and indeed children) are still growing and developing, they therefore do not now have citizen status.

For youth work, the argument for tipping balances of power in young people's favour insists that any need for their preparation and support cannot be merged into a denial that they already possess basic civil and legal rights and the nominal (if often ignored or suppressed) power these give. At a time when again we are talking about 'a lost generation', re-affirming this proposition has never been more urgent.

Again, exceptionally if not uniquely, youth work's commitment to these more equal power relationships has in some form been embedded in its public remit throughout its history. For example:

'A girls' committee ... is a very important element of a girls' club'. (Stanley, 1890: 62)

'[S]elf-government is a basic principle of the club method...'. (Henriques, 1933: 79)

As such, it has been practised neither as a grudging concession nor merely as a tactical manoeuvre to convince a potentially sceptical clientele to 'give youth work a chance' or to draw them into adult-designed and directed programmes. Rather, it exists as an integral element of the practice. It is there in its own right, rooted as we have seen in young people's choice to attend, to be proactively nurtured and resourced, including, as appropriate for the young people concerned, in arenas without as well as within the youth work context.

Are young people perceived and received as young people rather than through the filter of adult-imposed labels?

Youth work can and does work with 'special groups'—particularly for example by focusing on their interests, concerns and identities as young women and as Black, disabled and LGBTQ young people. Some may take a variety of other routes to becoming engaged including on occasions voluntarily following up a referral from a non-youth work agency.

For youth work, however, the *raison d'être* of the work stems ultimately from the fact that its 'users' are in their teens and so have some needs, demands—

and opportunities—associated with this stage in their personal development. This in turn assumes a holistic perception of and set of responses to those needs, demands and opportunities. The practice which emerges will therefore, as far as possible, not be blinkered by any of the (often pejorative) labels attached to ‘youth’ by powerful adults and adult institutions and by many policy-makers.

Given how pejorative that ‘youth’ label can be, especially in today’s climate, negotiating round and beyond it is, for the youth worker, crucial. Once attached, it is liable to have the same kinds of consequences as any other such prior and rigid categorisation of an individual: prejudgement of personality and behaviour; a masking of more personal characteristics or of alternative (perhaps self-chosen) identities; a resultant lowering of expectations of that individual, prompting those setting or assuming the label into narrowed and perhaps defensive rather than expansive and affirmative responses.

Youth work seeks to guard against these kinds of negative interpersonal processes in a number of ways. Some are captured later in this paper in other key defining features of youth work—in, for example, its adoption of potentiality rather than deficiency ‘filters’ through which to view the young person and in its respect for and active response to young people’s self-chosen collective identities.

Nonetheless, a crucial youth work starting point in its own right is a recognition and appreciation of the young person as a young person – that is, of each one who engages as a distinctive individual at a particularly formative stage in her or his life and development.

Is the practice starting where young people are starting - not least with their expectation that they will be able to relax, meet friends and enjoy themselves?

‘Connect, only connect’ with the person, with what they know, how they feel, what they want from the encounter: this has long been an equally crucial starting point for any educator aiming at internalised (‘owned’) and transferable learning. In more formal educational environments such as schools, colleges and universities the main connection sought is likely to be with the learner’s intellectual starting points. Even here, however, emotional connections are

important, focused for example on the learners’ levels of confidence, on their self-esteem or on the ‘baggage’ they may be bringing from, say, past educational or current family experiences.

If any of the informal educational outcomes to which youth work aspires are to be fulfilled (discussed later), making these emotional connections is an especially high—often probably a first—priority. Other connections, however, will also be vital. One, initially and perhaps ongoing, will be with young people’s own ‘territory’—with the physical and geographical spaces which, certainly for leisure purposes, they come to regard as ‘theirs’, where they hope to ‘freely associate’ and where they feel most comfortable. Often these will be public spaces which for periods of a day or week they use and even take over—a key arena, as suggested earlier, for detached youth work.

However, in part again because young people are choosing to participate, they will need to experience even the more institutional contexts and environments in which youth work takes place as, to a significant degree, theirs. Adult- as well as young people-defined rules and boundaries will usually, and necessarily, operate within these spaces. Nonetheless, sufficient freedom and informal and sociable control of their use will need to exist (or be created) to enable their users to experience high levels of ownership of them: as safe (and yet challenging), welcoming, flexible, consultative, dialogical, in significant ways responsive to their starting points.

Ideally, of course, these environments will be of high physical quality offering state-of-the-art facilities. Even when they are very basic, however, young people may still be willing to engage because workers, working with the young people themselves, have developed an environment which is young people-oriented and, to a significant degree, young people-driven. Key to defining and creating this ethos will be the creation of another crucial connection: starting with the concerns and interests—especially but not only with the leisure interests—of the young people actually involved. It is these that can help open up new opportunities not just for enjoyment and relaxation but again also for personal and shared developmental responses. Hence, young people’s willingness to come to a youth club in even the drabest of community halls and to engage with detached workers on the bleakest street corners or in a ‘youth shelter’ stuck out in the middle of a field.

Is one key focus of the practice on the young person as an individual?

Liberal educationists (who in this context include youth workers) have historically given high priority to 'the individual' and their development:

'... in a club of a hundred members each officer will know every boy'. (Russell and Rigby, 1908: 33).

'... each age recorded indicates a girl or a boy with special needs and aspirations, never a mere number'. (Montagu, 1954: 59)

'The head of the club must ... get to know and to understand really well every individual member'. (Henriques, 1933: 61)

Underpinning this focus, at least rhetorically, is a societal commitment long endorsed by youth workers to help realise the potential within each of us to become more than we are presently, and even perhaps—if we can break the constraining bonds of material or social circumstances—more than we have ever envisaged ourselves becoming.

In a continuing neo-liberal environment, however, without abandoning them altogether, these individualistic perspectives require renewed critical scrutiny. Individualistic values have become so deeply and matter-of-factly embedded in our everyday culture that all educational practices, including youth work, are now expected to concentrate almost exclusively on ensuring that each young person becomes 'resilient', 'self-reliant' and 'enterprising'. Such 'meritocratic' goals, however, mask the constraints on many individuals' opportunities and self-expression built into an intensely competitive environment which, in order to guarantee some 'winners', is bound to require many 'losers' (see Collini, 2021). This individualism is therefore likely to play out for many young people as a zero-sum experience which makes far more promises that it can possibly deliver.

Aspirations for youth work, as for all educational practice, are thus needed which include but go beyond, and indeed sometimes override, this elevation of the individual as the only legitimate focus.

Is the practice respectful of and actively responsive to young people's peer networks?

Youth work seeks to realise this broader vision by being respectful of and responsive to the 'collectivities' which are important to young people. Recognising the high priority most of them give to their relationships with their peers, one of the main ways it seeks to do this is by working with and through their self-chosen friendship groups—another commitment which from its earliest days has been at the heart of the practice:

'The boy has a natural instinct for association. The club must organise that association so that it is profitable to the members and to society as a whole'. (Henriques, 1933:8)

'[The club's] large crowd of young people, chatting loudly, sitting on the table, on the sides of chairs, and telling their experiences and giving vent to their opinions'. (Montagu, 1954: 73)

For young people, these groups operate most obviously via shared leisure activities—formal and informal, organised and casual, some less individually affirming or socially acceptable than others. Though often dismissed as mere 'recreational pastimes', youth workers have long sought to hone their skills for negotiating a degree of access to them and then for making some sustained inputs into their interactions. In broad terms, these aim to harness the groups' potential both for participants to share existing interests and concerns and for generating new developmental opportunities, both individual and collective. Again, often valued by young people for the here-and-now experiences they can create, they thus represent a self-chosen alternative to all those adult initiatives preoccupied with adolescence-as-transition—such as those concerned with ensuring young people 'mature' into skilled and conscientious workers, contributing and law-abiding citizens, caring parents.

Peer group involvements are likely to be particularly valued by young people for the time, space and activity they offer separate from parents and other power-holding adults in their lives. It is here—as individuals, in the present, on social and emotional 'territory' exclusive to their age and friendship group—that they can find some leeway for further clarifying for themselves a distinctive and more autonomous adult identity. Though not of course

without its contradictions, conflicts and sometimes painful challenges, the peer group can thus be one of the arenas in which a young person works out what is special about themselves, how they might wish to express this, who other than their parents they might want to recognise as ‘significant others’. Over time and in this self-chosen milieu, they can also test out the trustworthiness of this adult called ‘youth worker’ and if and how they can provide some personal support, including if needed an agreed link to other specialist services.

For that youth worker, however, the aspiration is for the practice to reach for much more than just these kinds of individual gains. Working with and through its collectivity—drawing on the extra human resources and capacity generated by its strength in numbers and on its operation as more than the sum of its parts—the peer group can also help produce valued shared ‘products’: a play, a music group, a sports team, cooking and eating together, walking together, a ‘resi’. Through it, too, young people can come together to campaign on wider issues and policies that affect them and that they want to change.

In order to establish productive connections with young people and have impacts which *they* value, recognition of the centrality for them of peer interactions, experiences and networks is thus located at the very heart of youth work practice. This, however, remains a far from typical position within wider ‘youth services’ provision. For one thing, as we have seen, our most powerful educational and welfare ideologies remain heavily focused on the individual, including often mainly or wholly on their defects. And when ‘peer group’ does appear on the radar of the policy-makers applying these ideologies, many still (implicitly if not explicitly) see and treat it as a negative: as inherently unhealthy, risky, threatening—a clique to be broken up, a gang to be decriminalised. As a result, the very label can seriously limit both perceptions and expectations of it.

Some peer groups are of course far from ready-made sites for the realisation of an individual young person’s unique talents, for positive collective action—or indeed for the wider social good. Like all collectivities they can be restrictive, oppressive and even damaging. A young person might, for example, find themselves on the receiving end of bullying or sexual and racial harassment or even life-threatening

gang violence—experiences which in an age of social media have become more common and intense. Here, therefore, the goals being sought through the youth work negotiation will not only have to be acceptable and credible to the young people. They may also need at times to challenge a group’s norms and its established internal power dynamics and structures.

Nonetheless, with peer networks so central to the lives of so many of the young people, working with and through them remains a defining feature of the practice—often crucial both for getting access to them in their leisure time and, more ambitiously, for opening up opportunities over time for their personal and collective development.

Is the practice respectful of and actively responsive to young people’s wider community and cultural identities and, where young people choose, is it seeking to help them strengthen these?

If youth work practice is to take its lead from where young people are starting it needs also to be committed to respecting and being responsive to other, for them significant, collectivities. Those of ‘community’ and ‘culture’ are of particular importance since, often in profound ways, they too help shape the young’s everyday experience and longer-term development. In this context, ‘community’ may be defined geographically or by a group’s commonality of interests and concerns; ‘culture’ by their consciousness of values, norms and practices they share with each other through immediate family, wider kin, friends and neighbours as well as through their class, disability, sexuality, ethnicity and/or gender. Indeed, it is particularly these overlaying identities which ultimately undermine the one-size-fits-all conceptions of ‘adolescence’ referred to earlier.

For youth work, here too both negative and positive perspectives are at work in determining how the wider society sees and seeks to place the individual within these collectivities. Youth work resists the assumptions that personal growth is determined *only* by individual choice and effort, and that individual failure is the product *only* of, for example, family pathology. For those many young people (and indeed adults) who have limited power to be proactive or indeed even answer back, our society can be experienced as isolating and dislocating, excluding

and demonising, not least for those who choose to retain and publicly assert the ‘otherness’ of their community and cultural identities.

Here too, contradictions and dilemmas are embedded in the practice. Like peer networks, these collectivities, as well as being supportive and liberating, can be constraining and even oppressive, their definitions of ‘otherness’ marginalising, harassing or even actively rejecting individuals or whole groups. Even where such prejudicial attitudes are not culturally endorsed, an individual’s efforts to balance self-expression and personal growth with respect for and adherence to community or cultural expectations can be painful and even, at the extreme, destructive. This ambivalence can be experienced particularly sharply where those individuals, though wanting to sustain their identity, nonetheless come to resent some of the demands and limits this places upon them.

However, in such situations, through positive and supportive interventions, youth work will be seeking to offer young people alternative affirming experiences, including with others struggling in similar ways. In conditions where the playing fields are far from level, encouraging such collectivities can provide individuals and groups with the extra support and security which here too derive from some additional strength in numbers.

These collectivities also have positive dimensions which fit closely with youth work’s educational and developmental aspirations. Strong community and cultural identities can be decisive in helping young people establish a clear and confident intellectual and emotional *self*-identity as well as helping them enrich their lives socially. Involvement can also raise consciousness of shared values and concerns from which wider political engagement may flow.

Because youth work has to negotiate these tensions, working with and through the community and cultural identities central to young people’s lives is never straightforward or one-dimensional. This is likely to be especially true where the worker does not or is not seen to share those identities personally. Once again, therefore, carefully negotiated entry into the collectivities young people define as significant for them is essential. A mutually acceptable, if often tense, reconciliation may again at some point be needed between, on the one hand, the starting points for this negotiation as defined by the young

person and, on the other, the youth worker’s judgment on whether, where and how that young person might seek to move beyond these.

In the delineation above of the ‘wider networks’ on which young people draw, one significant ‘absence’ is ‘the family’. This is not because most young people do not value their familial relationships, often broadly defined. Nor is it to suggest that youth workers seek to work deliberately against these or—whether or not they are supportive—that they underestimate their importance for young people. It is rather to recognise that, for youth work, families do not have the same profile or priority as either community or culture. This is because—as outlined earlier—in starting where young people are starting and by working on their territory, youth work engages with young people in just those time and physical spaces where, often explicitly, they are seeking some separation from familial, and particularly parental, oversight, influence and control.

Clearly circumstances will occur where involvement with family may be relevant and even urgent—occasionally in spite of what an individual young person might choose. Dilemmas, sometimes acute, are also likely where the lines between ‘family’ and ‘culture’ are especially blurred, for example, by class or ethnicity. However, where the choice presents itself: ‘Whose side am I on - the young person’s or the family’s?’, the ‘default’ response, set once again by the young person *choosing* to engage, is most often likely for the youth worker to be: ‘the young person’s’.

Is the practice seeking to go beyond where young people start, in particular by encouraging them to develop further their personal potential and be critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them?

Because of its emphasis on process, youth work is liable at times to give too low a priority to task and product (see IDYW, 2011: 46)—a tendency which has been exacerbated in recent years by the insistent top-down demands to demonstrate ‘hard’ outcomes. This risk exists too, however, precisely because so much youth work is located within young people’s leisure time and so often starts from what, to a casual observer, looks like mere recreational distractions. At times, youth workers themselves reinforce such perceptions by taking a line of least resistance, avoiding the often tough process of

seeking to negotiate beyond these starting points. In doing this they may, in effect, keep the young people in the already circumscribing traps of limited opportunity, experience and self-expectation.

Crucially, underpinning youth work is a commitment to working from a potentiality rather than a deficiency model of the young. This assumes that each young person, still at a relatively early stage of their development, is capable of more than she or he has yet achieved; and indeed, as suggested earlier, more even than anything they may have yet imagined for themselves. And so, rather than just going along with their immersion in the world as it is and as it has always been, much of it delivered to them by more powerful elders with their own agendas, a key youth work rationale is to provide secure arenas for them to risk their own more critical and creative responses.

As we have seen, for fuelling such movement, vital links need to be made with young people's starting points—with their expectation of relaxing and having fun; with their individual needs, interests and aspirations; with their identification with peer, community and cultural networks. These, however, are just that: starting points. Or, more actively: they are launch pads from which lift-off can begin into a newer and more developmentally stretching and liberating orbit of personal and collective achievement and satisfaction. Though, objectively, this may look quite modest, subjectively the personal height thus reached—the distance travelled—can end up for the person feeling quite giddy.

Here again, the notion of process is central because such expressions of this new self in new actions are rarely instant events, especially if they are to be sustained. Nor are they often brought about in isolation, insulated from the stimulus and sustained support of others. Few of us, whatever our class background, gender or other prescribed social role or situation, achieve raised self-expectations and the personal development these can generate without the prompting and prodding of others, including often, of course, our peers. Indeed, what is often most significant about this process is that, far from exercising major influence as 'role model', the youth worker's more important contribution may be as facilitator, particularly of relationships which for the young person are with 'people like me'.

Is the practice concerned with how young people feel as well as with what they know and can do?

Too single-minded a focus on process can thus result in youth workers underestimating the importance for young people of the new knowledge and 'hard' skills to be derived from the activities which youth work can make available to them. By being largely or wholly defined by the young people themselves, these 'outcomes' may also emerge as very different from those demanded by policy-makers and some funders. Nonetheless, for those young people they can be especially valued and valuable.

In the youth work context, however, young people are likely to be looking for something more. Given that most often they choose to come with their friends in their 'social' time, as important and motivating for many will be responses and experiences which touch them in quite personal ways: which respect them for who they are, what they think, how they feel; which allow them to speak for themselves, be heard and have some control over what goes on, not least in their encounters with adults; which take their peer relationships seriously and affirm their wider identities. By closing down the space or blocking the responsiveness needed for addressing these more expressive tasks, practice which is obsessively instrumental, preoccupied only with the technicalities of *what* is to be done, is always at risk of having limited impacts—even of being alienating.

For reversing these kinds of negative processes, therefore, another of youth work's essential markers has to be a sensitivity to and prioritising of what and how young people *feel* about themselves, about others, about their wider world. This again will need to include specific attention to their here-and-now as well as to the futures which adults are urging or requiring them to attain—and which for many in any kind of post-Covid context may now seem even more out of reach. For, whilst youth workers view young people as citizens now, they will more broadly see them, too, as *people* now—with feelings to be recognised and affirmed, emotional needs to be satisfied and actual as well as potential 'emotional intelligence' to be tapped into and endorsed.

Configuring youth work

Clearly many other practices-with-young-people would lay claim to some, even many, of the characteristics set out above. Those working in further and higher education, for example, would probably say that they too rely heavily on participants' voluntary engagement. Like other educators, they are also likely to see themselves as working hard to start where young people are starting, and then helping them to develop well beyond those starting points. Practitioners in a range of fields would assert their commitment to the client or student, or indeed patient, as an individual, to showing respect for their community or cultural identities and to connecting with their feelings.

However, even where there is common ground, youth workers are likely to be looking to push beyond some often taken-for-granted boundaries: for example, beyond consulting and informing young people to a more genuine form of power sharing; and beyond respecting to actively embracing their peer group and collective identities, including helping them to assert these more confidently. Even more fundamentally, however, other practices are unlikely to see *all* the features outlined as requiring the high priority they have within youth work or to insist that their close interrelationship and interdependence constitute an overall configuration which defines their practice's distinctiveness.

How then might this 'configuration' show itself in a practice like youth work which takes place 'on the wing' (DES, 1987: 2), in largely unstructured environments, within highly interactive face-to-face situations? In dealing with such a question, practitioners are prone to fall back on 'intuition' — 'it's just what we do, subconsciously'. Yet, where recognisable youth work is occurring, the practice, far from being simply random and off-the-cuff, will at the very least be guided by a prepared mind and shaped by some practised tactical responses often called 'skills'. Like jazz, its process will at the same time be improvised for the moment, and disciplined (Harris, 2014).

Set out as a series of open-ended questions, the final section of this paper seeks to capture some of the elements of both these qualities — of the preparedness and the tactical responsiveness. Over a decade and a half after they were first framed,

they continue to be a work in progress, included as material to encourage critical debate and further input. Here, I believe, face-to-face practitioners' contributions will be crucial since credible 'answers' are only likely to emerge from searching, systematic and collective as well as individual reflection on practice, of the kind, for example, which IDYW's youth work story-telling workshops sought to stimulate (See IDYW, 2015).

This reflection might then be prompted by the following kinds of questions:

Who are these young people?

- > Why are they here?
- > Why are they here?
- > What individual abilities, interests and aspirations are they bringing with them?
- > What are their levels of confidence and self-esteem:
 - > as individuals;
 - > in their relationships with their closest friend or friends;
 - > within their wider informal peer group networks;
 - > with - which - adults;
 - > in possible relationships with us, the youth workers actually in touch with them?
- > What are, for them, important peer relationship/group contexts?
 - > What are the power relations, rules and sanctions within these?
 - > What effects are these having on individual young people – positive and/or negative; defined how?
 - > What implications are these likely to have for any youth work intervention?

- > What, for them, are explicit or possible wider identities which need to be respected and embraced?
- > How are structural factors—poverty, (un)employment, class, race, gender, disability, sexuality—likely to be affecting them, individually, within their peer groups, more widely?
- > What impacts have the Covid-19 pandemic had on any of these factors?
- > What do these ‘readings’ suggest as possible/promising connecting points for any youth work intervention?

Is some youth work intervention in these young people’s lives justified?

- > Are there ethical considerations to take into account before making such an intrusion into these young people’s relationships, their leisure—their lives generally?
- > What would be the justification for making such an intervention?
- > On what evidence?
- > How motivated are these young people likely to be to receive/respond to such interventions?

How do we personalise this first contact?

- > How do we tailor a first contact to respect these young people’s right to choose whether or not to become further engaged?
- > How do we tailor this to who they are and where they have reached in their (personal and group) development—particularly as young people?
- > How do we tailor it to their wider collective identities?
- > Where could this contact best happen?
- > Who should try to make it?

- > Does the identity of the worker(s) matter—whether, for example, they are local or ‘an incomer’; male or female; black or white; gay, straight or ‘trans’; (dis)abled?

Within what ‘activity’ or on what other ‘territory’ could the contact be best initiated?

- > What are the (stated or implied) individual and/or collective interests, concerns, aspirations, preoccupations, of these young people?
- > What are possible points of youth work access to and entry onto this territory?
- > Where will an appropriate youth work intervention fit on an informal-formal continuum of activity and structure?

What connections might be made between these young people’s starting points and ways of moving on beyond them—for prompting additional developmental opportunities for these young people?

- > Again: What individual abilities, interests and aspirations have these young people brought to their meetings with youth workers?
- > And: What are their levels of confidence and self-esteem?
- > What connections can be made between these starting points and potential developmental opportunities?
- > How motivated are these young people for actually looking for, making and acting on such connections? What barriers might exist to this happening?
- > What youth work inputs might be needed to create/increase this motivation?
- > What youth work inputs might be needed to build these connections?

Within all this, how best to tread the delicate line between, on the one hand, supporting and increasing and, on the other, weakening or undermining these young people's autonomy and control over their lives?

- > How do these young people define:
 - > their starting points, including their starting motivation;
 - > their interests, abilities and aspirations;
 - > their levels of confidence and self-esteem;
 - > their significant peer relationships and community and cultural identities?
- > How far do the potential youth work definitions of each of these coincide with those of young people?
- > Where are there significant discrepancies between the two?
- > What are the justifications for trying to go beyond—maybe even override—these young people's own perceptions and definitions?
- > In seeking to do this, what might be the cost-benefit balance for these young people?

The youth worker with the prepared mind will also, however, need to be ready for another set of (usually unspoken/implicit) questions which, again often 'on the wing', in the midst of the action, will require some kind of response, even if this ends up as a non-response. These may, for example, include:

- > Do I correct that factual error—or that one? Or just ignore them?
- > Do I follow up that implied personal disclosure? Now? Later, in some more private space? Or just keep a watching brief because at the moment the implication is so weak or because I'm not sure the young person would respond to a follow up?
- > Do I react to that racist remark now? Or later? By a confrontational challenge? By a more indirectly questioning approach, by prompting a one-to-one discussion? Or by looking for some group activity or experience which will address the issues more implicitly and tangentially?
- > Is that really an expression of an interest in music/football/discussing relationships between the girls and the lads/challenging the council's cuts to the Youth Service? Might some of the group be willing to follow it up? If so, initiated how, when, by whom? Or was it just a passing remark? To be followed up anyway?

An unfinished practice in an outcome-oriented world

These questions are offered as an attempt to illuminate—to bring to life—some of the realities of the process likely to be set in motion when the core and defining features of youth work outlined in this paper come together into an interdependent whole, an overall configuration. Such continuing (self-) questioning also helps to highlight how, to be implemented, a worker's strategic vision of where these young people might go, what they could become, will require grounding in a tactical 'nous' involving balance, timing and nerve. It is here particularly that responses will need to make the how of the worker's interventions consistent with the messages they want the young people to take away from their encounters with them - in other cruder terms, to put their actions where their mouth is.

The questions are also intended to illustrate something else: the essentially 'unfinished' nature of a youth work practice which, to be effective, requires practitioners—to say nothing of the young people they work with(!)—constantly to negotiate uncertainty and doubt (Davies, 2015b): to make balanced choices, resolve dilemmas, take the risks which are integral to youth work's, and indeed many other of life's, shifting informal human exchanges. All of which explains why (very unfashionably) it can offer no guarantees of reaching certain and final 'outcomes', least of all ones which have been externally laid down before any of those 'who-are-these-young-people' questions have been posed, never mind confronted.

All of this returns us with a bump to our starting point—to the fact that, by its very nature, youth work will (at best) often be able only accidentally to sight its targets with the clarity, or demonstrate

its impacts with the neatness, which policy-makers and many funding bodies have for so long now been demanding. Within our still highly influential neo-liberal managerialist frames of reference, this of course is not just youth work's dilemma: which teacher or social worker or, indeed, doctor would not recognise it? However, because youth work is so process-driven, the challenge to its practice remains especially sharp.

At yet another critical historical moment, starting from these kinds of negative stances in the struggle for youth work is unlikely to have much resonance or impact. More positive responses in that struggle will go on being needed, driven by a spirited and coherent articulation of what distinctively defines the work as youth work. This will especially need to highlight how often it is just these defining features of the practice which make it attractive and acceptable to some young people in the first place, particularly those not being reached by other services; and how these distinctive ways of working can motivate them to make the personal and educational gains which policy-makers and funders repeatedly claim they want for them.

This paper is offered as a contribution to that articulation and its application to practice—for others to amend, build on, and refine as their situation requires.

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