Lessons from the street: Informal education-based social ties building and the danger of prescription.

Introduction.

Discussion of neighbourhood social ties building must take account of the significant role young people play in determining the social cohesiveness of their communities – for good and for bad.

This paper focuses on the nature of effective street-based interventions with young people. It makes the case that many contemporary social policy interventions that target public spaces are counter-productive and can actually contribute to the demise of social ties. In contrast, it argues, historical models of negotiated intervention are capable of contributing to social ties building provided they are freed from much of the prescription and bureaucracy associated with a range of social policies that, ironically, aim to achieve social cohesion, social inclusion and Community Safety.

In this context, ‘what works’ in these settings is of growing interest, particularly as young people’s presence in public spaces is increasingly seen as a catalyst for the degradation of social cohesion.

Whilst public spaces have long since been recognised as sites of ‘contestation’ between young people and adults (Tiffany, 2005), a recent increase in formal interventions (typically, more ‘bobbies on the beat’, Police Community Support Officers, Neighbourhood Wardens etc.) has led, inevitably, to the increased politicisation of ‘the street’ (Waiton, 2005 and O’Malley & Waiton, 2005).

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It goes without saying that young people are more prevalent in public spaces. Unlike adults (who have their pubs and clubs etc.), the street is often the only, social space that is accessible to them. As such, it is easy to cast them as the chief protagonists in problems associated with public spaces and to fail to explore the complexity of working both with them and the wider community in a civil society context.

Whilst a distinction needs to be drawn between public spaces and public places, it is important to note that the latter have also become subject to this process of politicisation. Worley, 2006\(^4\), for example, describes how young people’s access to library facilities, and what they can do within them, is increasingly controlled by authority figures. Similarly, in my own recent experience as a community worker, I witnessed how, in response to young people misbehaving in a library, opening hours were altered to prevent school-aged children and young people from using its facilities.

I shall, however, argue that this process of politicisation is most acutely felt at street level and that this has had a marked effect on street-based interventions and, specifically, the practice of detached youth work.

**What is detached youth work?**

Detached youth work is a long-standing form of community-based intervention aimed at working with young people experiencing social exclusion. Its origins lie in sociological studies of delinquent teenage gangs and subsequent street work aimed at diverting and rehabilitating those ‘hard-to-reach’. (See [http://infed.org/youthwork/b-detyw.htm](http://infed.org/youthwork/b-detyw.htm) for a fuller historical account).

Over time, this work increasingly embraced educational perspectives and action research methodologies. Most specifically, its practitioners have long

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since drawn upon theories of informal education (see, for example, Smith 1999 and www.infed.org.uk) and many readily identify themselves as informal educators.

The Albermarle Report (1960 para.186) provided a further impetus for the development of detached youth work, drawing attention to the value of:

*Peripatetic youth workers, not attached directly to any organisation or premises, who would work with existing groups or gangs of young people…. Only by going out to them shall we discover how to gain their confidence, to meet their needs and to make them aware of more genuinely rewarding pursuits.*

More recently, due to the increase in numbers of community-based interventions (such as outreach and mobile provision but also the formal interventions identified above), it has become necessary to differentiate between detached youth work and other forms of practice:

*Detached youth work endeavours to provide a broad-based, open-ended, social education in which the problems to be dealt with, and the manner in which they are dealt with, emerges from a dialogue between the young person and the youth worker.*

Crimmens et al., 2004

Detached youth workers work for a variety of statutory and voluntary organisations. They work on young people’s territory, as defined by their interpretations of “space, needs, interests, concerns and lifestyles” (Tiffany, 2006:5). This implies also that they work with young people in the social

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6 Website of informal education: [www.infed.org.uk](http://www.infed.org.uk).
(group) context in which they are contacted and that the young people choose to voluntarily associate with them.

Increasingly identified by policy makers as practitioners ‘with access’, detached youth work has been subject (since the 1980s) to changes in funding and social policy imperatives. These have focussed not just on young people disinclined to engage with the wider youth service but, particularly, those not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Thus, detached youth workers have been more explicitly expected to contribute to the alleviation of a range of social exclusion indicators such as teenage pregnancy, poor sexual health, drug misuse, crime and antisocial behaviour.

Whilst this shift recognised the need to work flexibly with young people, many programmes became increasingly prescribed and were criticised for not appreciating the complexity of many young people’s lives and the subtleties of detached youth work practice (Davies, 2001\textsuperscript{10}).

My own research (Tiffany, 2006\textsuperscript{11}) [and identified hereafter as the PIN Project], builds upon the findings of Crimmens et. al. It further reinforces the importance of adhering to an authentic definition of detached youth work in order for it to be effective. This can and does create a conflict between authenticity and the desire of policy makers to deliver specific outcomes.

Indeed, this prescription is not only at odds with what detached youth work is roundly held to be but an impediment to practice that has the undoubted capacity to strengthen social ties. In some cases, this prescription can be more than a mere barrier - it can be counter-productive; it can exacerbate young people’s social exclusion, contribute to the further degradation of inter-


community social ties and hamper efforts to develop relationship between young people and youth workers.

The villains of the piece.

- Standards.

Foremost among the drivers that create these tensions is the concept of standards. The narrative of standards has become central to all public service delivery. But its effect in guaranteeing improvements in quality of service have been assumed rather than scrutinised. Making sense of this narrative is vital to any analysis of ‘what works’:

*Intrinsic to the understanding of standards whereby performance is to be judged are the values to which the notions of standards are logically linked. Standards are not self-evident because the values they embody are rarely self-evident or beyond dispute.*

Pring, 2005:37

It becomes clear then that judgements about what is good practice can be ideologically driven and, potentially, fail to cohere with what is known to work on the street.

Research from the PIN Project shows how standards are translated into a detailed pro-forma of targets, outputs and outcomes, against which practice is to be measured. The research finds that the pre-scription [hyphen added to draw attention to the significance of things being already written] of much contemporary detached youth work fundamentally undermines the intrinsic flexibility on which its success relies.

Whilst Crimmens et al. (2004:74) state “effective face-to-face work appears to require greater scope for discretion, negotiation and innovation”,

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contemporary bureaucratic frameworks, and the funding and social policy regimes that underpin them are, militate against this.

This manifests itself in today’s detached youth workers undertaking a much wider range of tasks than their predecessors. The PIN Project identified an array of activities, from sexual health outreach work (funded by a local Primary Care Trust), to running low-intervention youth clubs in public buildings (at the behest of local crime prevention agencies keen to ‘get young people off the streets’), to time-specific, tailor-made, issue-based projects (e.g. drug / health / crime etc.) and ‘rapid response’ initiatives that target ‘hot spots’ of anti-social behaviour.

It is clear that in all these activities the agenda is set outside of the relationship between the young people and the workers. As a consequence, young people become consumers, rather than - more authentically - creators, of youth work (as has been its historical raison d’être\(^\text{14}\)). Programme orientation and ‘teaching’ appears to have replaced process orientation and informal education.

It is now all too common to hear workers saying: we have this programme, do you want to get involved?\(^\text{15}\)

Furthermore, practice becomes reactive to the problems associated with young people, rather than responsive to their needs\(^\text{16}\); and detached youth work becomes a default\(^\text{17}\) reaction to any and all of these problems.

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Of these tasks, those that are informed by the agendas of Community Safety Partnerships have elicited the greatest concerns. PIN Project respondents typically state: *I’m not a trouble-shooter. We need to fight a battle against ‘hot spotting’. We’re not the 4th emergency service.*

A more general frustration is implied by: *I am here for young people; the work shouldn’t be informed by the needs of others.* [For a further description of these tensions see also Tiffany, 2006b].

- Outcomes and Targets

Where the needs of others are translated into ‘outcomes' to be achieved, many detached youth workers feel pressured to meet targets associated with these outcomes (invariably in the form of numbers of young people to be worked with). As a consequence, it is now commonplace to find practitioners focussing their attention on those young people who are more responsive to the opportunities offered them. I have described this as the ‘pistachio effect’; those of us who have eaten pistachio nuts will recognise the fact that many are easy to open but others represent a greater challenge. The reality is that, most often, we simply discard the latter. In practice, this is manifested in workers failing to invest the considerable time and energy necessary to develop relationships with the most socially excluded [ironically, detached youth work’s historical constituency]. Implicitly then, their social exclusion is compounded and exacerbated.

Typical observations of practice from the PIN Project include:

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Attempts to encourage young people to fill in a ‘record of progress’ were met enthusiastically by some, but appeared to act as a barrier with others, such that they moved away.\textsuperscript{21}

Furthermore, some detached youth workers report: “a tendency to drop them” [those seen as challenging and difficult to work with]\textsuperscript{22}, as the investment implied in working with this cohort (particularly in terms of time) makes it impossible to achieve the number of young people worked with demanded by target setters. As such, an ‘economics’ rationale now appears to dominate the thinking of many detached youth workers.

The irony is profound. Social policy (DEE, 2001\textsuperscript{23} & SEU, 2005\textsuperscript{24}) specifically targets this cohort but the ‘bureaucratic burden’\textsuperscript{25} associated with this policy appears to divert attention from them.

The wider impact of public sector bureaucracy has recently been explored by the UK Government’s Better Regulation Commission (BRC)\textsuperscript{26}. Amongst other things, the BRC considered the impact of regulatory processes on community capacity and cohesion. It concluded that excessive regulation can undermine trust-based relationships and the overall disposition of actors to take responsibility for their own lives. These conclusions are entirely consistent with those of the PIN Project, which identifies the threat bureaucracy and prescription poses to this central tenet of detached youth work: the promotion of autonomy through relationship-based learning. The deleterious effect on the actor’s ability to develop social-ties and contribute to neighbourhood social capital become all too apparent.

Focus and funding: the shift from an emphasis on communities to an emphasis on issues

In tandem, the short-term nature of many funding streams and changes in geographical emphasis informed by local partnership structures often leads to pressure on practitioners to work in several areas. This further weakens their capacity to build up a (necessary) intimate knowledge of both the individuals and groups they are working with and the local community. Indeed, good practice has always emphasised the importance of not working with young people in isolation and working to facilitate ties between them and other members of the community; youth workers have almost always been described as youth and community workers (Jeffs & Smith, 1999:120)\(^{27}\)

The role youth and community workers can play in facilitating social ties, particularly across the generations) is well-documented (Pain, 1995\(^{28}\) and Ramsden & Anderson, 1998\(^{29}\)). Furthermore, these ties and, more specifically, people’s involvement in their communities are seen as key protective factors, integral to neighbourhood social cohesion and the basis of informal social control (Barnes, 2006\(^{30}\)).

Ties, in this sense, are a product of ‘knowing’ or belief:

“Where neighbours are known, parenting values are known (and are shared); informal social control is more likely … believing neighbours are like-minded is a very significant protective factor. In contrast, fearing neighbours is the most important limiting factor (op. cit.).


\(^{30}\) Barnes, J. (2006) What prevents, or could increase, informal social control in neighbourhoods? Findings of the Family and Neighbourhoods Study (FANS). London School of Economics (LSE) / Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) Seminar, 18th January 2006.
But, again, practitioners report barriers to initiating these ties: *Facilitating putting people in the same space may seem [to funders and policy makers] a less than adequate use of resources, but it can be very effective.*

As above, the prescriptive context of much community-based social policy is seen, as hampering of, and in some case destructive of, social-ties building.

**A Theoretical Analysis.**

These findings emerge at the same time as others from the UK Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), a left-leaning and highly influential think-tank. Margo et. al. (2006)\textsuperscript{32} draw a simple conclusion: structured youth work is good at facilitating young people’s non-cognitive (social) dispositions, and unstructured youth work is counterproductive:

*Participation in unstructured [youth] activities was associated with antisocial behaviour or mixing with antisocial peers in young adulthood, and was not associated with positive personal and social skills [development].*\textsuperscript{33}

These findings appear damning but the same study opens a door to revealing the complexity of what is happening here:

*It is likely that organised activities taking place outside of compulsory schooling, with an element of choice, the mixing of age groups and freedom from exam pressures and other concerns about attainment, are what enable these contexts to be more beneficial to non-cognitive development…*

*…Replacing what currently counts as ‘hanging out’ with a more structured curriculum is not necessarily going to appeal. The risk is that it may stimulate*

\textsuperscript{31} Whitworth, M. (2006) *Inter-generational approaches to tackling youth disorder.* South Shields, LifeLink.


all the negative connotations of schooling that put these young people off education in the first place.\textsuperscript{34}

A pattern emerges of why youth workers and, particularly, their detached counterparts are able to work with this target group where many others struggle to do so. It is precisely because of their preparedness to enter into relationships with young people \textit{without prescription} that enables trust to develop.

\textit{Thereafter}, structured youth work is, indeed, common and often powerfully effective (see, for example, accounts in Burgess & Burgess, 2006\textsuperscript{35}). But this structure is, invariably, the product of negotiation between youth workers and young people and informed by the issues that emerge from these earlier \textit{non-prescribed} conversations and dialogues.

So what is happening here?

It is clear that civil society is a fragile environment and that efforts to intervene prescriptively are often treated with both disdain and the self-exclusion of potential actors. Even quasi-formal interventions such as reward schemes (designed to promote good behaviour) invoke suspicion and are often seen as explicit attempts at social control\textsuperscript{36}. Where efforts to promote neighbourhood social-ties building are seen in these terms they are doomed to failure.

Foucault’s work on governmentality\textsuperscript{37} is surely prescient. It is underpinned by his earlier work on the self, which draws a distinction between the state governing to maintain its status as a state (as an end itself) and the more democratic notion of governance, in which citizens willing accept [legitimise]

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Barnes2006} Barnes, J. (2006) \textit{What prevents, or could increase, informal social control in neighbourhoods?} Findings of the Family and Neighbourhoods Study (FANS). London School of Economics (LSE) / Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) Seminar, 18th January 2006.
\end{thebibliography}
being governed on the basis of an alliance to bring benefits and enhance the quality of their lives. Where there is discordance, Foucault argues that the state is, effectively, policing its citizenry and this has negative consequences.

Whilst this is most often seen as a form of paternalism, rather than an act of coercion, nonetheless it acts as: “a form of surveillance and control as attentive as that of a head of a family over his household and his goods” (op. cit.) And, as such, it can (particularly in disadvantaged community settings) be seen as oppressive\(^3^8\).

Likewise, a potentially detrimental ‘hidden agenda’ may be revealed through Lyotard’s analysis of performativity (particularly as applied to education)\(^3^9\). In this, education is legitimised through its performance in achieving a series of prescribed aims. Problematically, for Lyotard, and indeed here for our analysis of the nature of effective interventions in civil society settings:

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\text{Any experimentation in discourse, institutions, and values (with the inevitable “disorders” it brings in the curriculum, student supervision and testing, and pedagogy – not to mention its socio-political repercussions) is regarded as having little or no operational value and is not given the slightest credence in the name of the seriousness of the system.}
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Lyotard, 1997:50\(^4^0\)

Concluding remarks: From pre-scription to uncertainty.

Lyotard’s reference to “disorder” (see above) informs my concluding remarks.

Human geography might be regarded as peculiar source of inspiration for those intent in exploring efficacy in neighbourhood social ties building. But it

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\(^{38}\) Barnes, J. (2006) *What prevents, or could increase, informal social control in neighbourhoods?* Findings of the Family and Neighbourhoods Study (FANS). London School of Economics (LSE) / Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) Seminar, 18th January 2006.


offers important insights into the complexity and fragility of civil society that can usefully inform the practice of those seeking to intervene in these environments. The work of Sennett\textsuperscript{41} and Merrifield\textsuperscript{42} draw our attention to both the significance and value of uncertainty in the urban environment. It is easy to extrapolate its potential for animating relationships between community workers responsible for social ties building and those they are working with.

As such, and as evidenced by the findings of the PIN Project, effective practice appears underpinned by the positive disposition of educators toward uncertainty. Those successful in facilitating social ties amongst often conflicting and disparate groups appear to actively celebrate this uncertainty\textsuperscript{43}.

The significance of working in an open-ended, process oriented way has already been referred to, but it has others attributes. It epitomises a commitment to working in a democratic, participative manner. A further irony emerges here; in tandem with pre-scriptive social policy is a parallel policy driver that aims to encourage the increased involvement and participation of client groups. Where participation is acknowledged to be: \textit{The principle that those who will be substantially affected by decisions made by social and political institutions must be involved in the making of those decisions}\textsuperscript{44}, a paradox is clear. As such, participation rarely gets beyond tokenistic and consultative dimensions, in contrast to those that are more significantly \textit{determined} by actors\textsuperscript{45}.

Effective practice, therefore, is evidenced by this [a] commitment to the centrality of young people in determining the youth work agenda. This is

\textsuperscript{43} Tiffany, G.A. (Pending) \textit{Courage as a democratic disposition: The importance of celebrating uncertainty in education}.
\textsuperscript{44} Tiffany, G.A. (2005) \textit{Participation; what’s it all about?} Presentation to Newcastle City Council Conference on Participation, 4\textsuperscript{th} May 2005.
achieved in the context of a negotiated relationship, as only this can accord credibility, respect and status to both practitioner and client. The preparedness of detached youth workers to go to young people (epitomized by the words of one young respondent to the PIN Project: “detached youth workers are different, because they come to us”) is illustrative of a valuing of the person (as distinct from the problems they might represent), of process (as distinct from product and outcome), of democracy (and the democratisation of practice), and of the potentiality of uncertainty to open up new, mutually, beneficial conversations, dialogues and possibilities for action that contribute to social inclusion and community cohesion.

Making changes to monitoring and evaluation systems, which are increasingly seen as no more than mechanisms for ranking and the enforcement of accountability (rather than processes by which young people’s learning can be evidenced and supported) is a first step to achieving this aim. But this will, inevitably, rely on managers, administrators, bureaucrats and policy makers also learning to value and celebrate uncertainty.

Having faith and trust in the human capacity and instinct for engagement is surely a disposition central to the character of all those who truly strive to facilitate the building of neighborhood social ties.

http://www.graemetiffany.co.uk/