

Learning about equality: negotiating boundaries in generic youth work

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Abstract

The concept of equality has been established as an underpinning value base in youth work literature. Yet, equality is a complex concept that includes perspectives on rights, social justice and egalitarianism which are variously applied in youth work but young people's experience of equality in generic youth work is under-researched. This paper draws on an ethnographic case study that examined how young people learned about equality in one generic youth work setting.

This research was built on the experiences of 17 young people, in one Scottish local authority. In addition to interviews, I observed young people in a range of locations: café, computing room, disability sports, games hall and rehearsal studio. Mertens' (2005) transformative paradigm underpinned analysis to provide empirical evidence of young people's experiences of equality in one youth work case setting. The study not only confirmed that youth work contributed to young people's learning about equality there, it also identified the negotiated nature of youth work.

Conclusions are drawn about how young people negotiated their relationships with youth workers and 'other' young people. Analysis also suggests that being treated equally, and working across social and cultural boundaries, facilitated their learning about equality and helped young people to make micro-level changes in their lives. The paper calls for further investment in generic youth work as a starting point for equality work and asserts an optimistic future for practice that has a democratic and emancipatory purpose at its heart.

Keywords: boundary crossing; critical pedagogy, equality; negotiation; youth work.

Introduction

This paper is developed in five sections. First, it outlines the contexts and purposes of youth work and equality studies that underpinned the research and methods used. Second, it discusses inherent power relations in young people's participation that suggested a paradox between liberating and controlling practices. Third, a social model for thinking about equality is examined through discussion of social and cultural boundary crossing. Next, the promotion of emancipatory practice foregrounds analysis of the stages of negotiations in young people's relationships, and finally, conclusions are drawn about the processes of negotiation in youth work that contribute to emancipatory praxis.

The context and purpose of youth work and equality studies

The youth work context

Open access, generic youth work appears to be in a constant state of flux where it is suggested as occupying 'an ambivalent space...appearing to be under threat...[but also]...valued and in demand, on condition that it constantly reinvents itself' (Batsleer, 2010, p. 153). Youth work is often caught between an inclination towards a critical stance that challenges the status quo and one that is compliant with prevailing social discourse. This dual inclination underpins interest in defending and rearticulating a social and democratic purpose for youth work (Coburn and Wallace, 2011; Davies, 2005; de St Croix, 2010; Jeffs and Smith, 2005, 2010; Smith, 2002; Taylor, 2008; Tett, 2010; Young, 2006).

Youth work often becomes important to young people 'at that particular moment in their lives when they are developing their awareness, seeking answers and, crucially, beginning to explore their beliefs, values and choices (Young, 2006, p. 28). Thus, it is unsurprising that they seek new relationships on which to test their ideas, and for some young people engaging in youth work is an important aspect of their developing self where, according to Harland and Morgan (2006, p. 10), 'the process of youth work...[is]...contingent on the quality of relationship between a young person and a youth worker'. While Banks (2010) argues that generic youth work might be discounted altogether, to avoid confusing a broad range of leisure time pursuits with youth work as a distinct disciplinary area, she continues to suggest youth work as a specialist occupation that involves, 'work with young people with an

informal and/or developmental approach and purpose...by people who are qualified as youth workers or who consciously adopt the identity of youth worker' (Banks, 2010, p. 5).

While it is fallacy to describe all work with young people as youth work, simply because of the age of those involved, Coburn and Wallace (2011) have developed a frame for considering different kinds of youth work. For example, a summer programme or midnight football may be described as positive or active leisure, configured as 'functional youth work' (p. 13) involving young people in diversionary or life-enhancing youth services, often 'delivered' by non-qualified youth support workers.

Another kind of youth work is suggested as 'liberal youth work' (p.14) where there is an emphasis on association and socialising through which personal development, achievement of individual goals and group work may be undertaken. Participation is open but may discretely target specific young people and the curriculum is largely developed through negotiation between young people and youth workers, where older or more experienced participants are encouraged to lead or contribute to certain elements. Relationships with young people are developed over a medium to longer term period of time through their engagement in a particular project or centre.

These two kinds of youth work are distinct from the process-based iterative 'critical youth work' (p. 15) methodologies. In critical youth work, young people are encouraged to learn by probing common sense views of the world, to facilitate understanding of justice and injustice, power and oppression and ultimately, to promote social transformation. Youth work is political and participation in society is connected to democratic citizenship.

There are also professional distinctions between practices, as exemplified in school education, social work or faith-based settings.

My understanding of youth work is premised by Sercombe's assertion that the primary client is always the young person which 'places youth work in radical distinction to most other forms of engagement with young people... [where often the role]...is to balance the various interests of different stakeholders' (Sercombe, 2010, p. 26). Sercombe offers clarity in suggesting, 'youth work is a professional relationship in which the young person is engaged as the primary client in their social context' (Sercombe, 2010, p. 27). The social context for

this research was a youth work environment, called New World. The setting comprised a mix of leisure and education, where young people socialised with friends, and where they also engaged with youth workers in professionally developed praxis.

Education is proposed as praxis when people act and reflect upon the world together in order to make visible the histories and problems that are present, and to take steps to change things (Anglas Grande, 2009). To reflect upon the world we need to understand it, to see historical constructions of power and the dominant culture in relation to the everyday cultural experiences of people who are subordinate to those in power (McLaren, 2009). In seeking to include and empower young people, youth work ethics are linked to equality work, where ‘social justice is the core value of youth work’ (Crooks, 1992, p. 20) and youth workers commit to, ‘the Freirian notion...of remedying social inequality’ (Corney, 2004, p. 522). This kind of critical and emancipatory youth work resonates with a conceptualisation of education as the practice of freedom (Freire, 1970; 1996) and is consistent with youth work methodologies that are:

...distinctively educational and involves constructive interventions with young people in non-formal settings...primarily concerned with personal and social education, and...characterised by the voluntary engagement of young people

Harland and McCready (2012, p. 85)

Yet, the lack of critical mass in youth work research is a problem (Spence, 2007). While there is evidence that research mindedness is being cultivated, new ways of theorising and valuing youth work are needed, in order to respond to the diverse range of practices that could be, and increasingly are, described as youth work.

A social model for thinking about equality?

Posing the question ‘equality of what’, Sen (1985; 1999) theorised equality as capability. This builds on Sen’s conceptualisation that well-being depends on the capabilities of people to achieve agency in their capacities to do things, and to achieve their own goals. Importantly, capability is about people’s capacity to function well, and should not be restricted to a limited set of functions that are within their reach. Sen argued that if one person has the same capability to function as another, then they each have the ‘freedom to live well...[and]...the freedom to achieve well-being’ (Sen, 1985, p. 200).

Baker et al. (2004) argue that liberal egalitarianism falls short of the mark because it does not challenge inequalities that persist and so, more needs to be done to rebuild and reconfigure dominant social structures. Equality of condition takes basic equality, expressed in terms of human and social rights to food and shelter, as the starting point for discussion. Yet, these basic rights are not a satisfactory way of ensuring fair distribution of resources. Thus, a liberal egalitarian perspective, such as the position taken in literature on social justice (Rawls, 1971) is argued by Baker et al. (2004) as helping to manage inequality rather than contributing to its eradication, for example, in being concerned with how equally resources are competed for, rather than fairly distributed.

Taking a social egalitarian perspective, underpinned by co-operation and solidarity, equality of condition aims to ‘eliminate major inequalities altogether or at least massively to reduce the current scale of inequality’ (Baker et al., 2004, p. 33). They propose this can be achieved by distinguishing between fairness in the competition for advantage (liberal egalitarianism) and fairness in the freedom of choice that people have in life (social egalitarianism).

This distinction is grounded in argument that fairness of opportunity, through competing with others, does not bring fairness of choice, and indeed may limit the choices of those who are unable to compete, or who do not win the competition. Equality of condition addresses these concerns by seeking to change the rules in society, so that everyone has a fair and free choice to live their lives in the way they want. In theorising equality of condition, Baker et al. (2004) offer five dimensions of equality: respect and recognition; power, love care and solidarity, resources and working and learning. Each of these dimensions offers insights about the extent to which equality may be identified as present in a particular setting or situation and in this study these were used to consider the extent to which youth work appeared to enhance young people’s sense of well-being in order to create a liberating praxis.

Linking equality studies, as inter-disciplinary study of equality and inequality, to youth work

The word equality has different meanings for different people. Equality has been identified as concerned with equipping people to have the capacity to deal with their own situations and to make decisions that enable them to take forward their own aims and actions (Baker, et al, 2004). Young people’s capacity to deal with their own situations is influenced by how they are positioned in relationship to the rest of society and to each other. In the UK, young people are routinely found to be ‘at the bottom of the scale of power...[and]...have norms, rules and

definitions of order imposed upon them' (Hamilton and Seymour, 2006, p. 63). This makes it difficult for many young people to take forward their own aims and actions. In studying equality, Baker et al (2004) suggest a focus on particular social groups who experience inequalities. While not wishing to homogenise young people, I believe they can be described as a social group that experiences inequality because of age discrimination.

Despite an emancipatory vision of youth work, a proliferation of state intervention in the lives of young people (Mizen, 2004) means that youth work has become, 'increasingly prescriptive, intrusive and insistent' (Davies and Merton, 2009, p. 46) in measuring practice. The profession has been overlooked in favour of quantifiable interventions that target outcomes and outputs related to behaviour change, preparation for work or diversion from prosecution. In seeking solutions to perceived individual problems, rather than seeking to address social issues which sustain inequality and frame young people's lives, such interventions suggest a purpose for youth work that masks its emancipatory potential. For example, Jeffs and Banks (2010) have suggested that a more explicit social control agenda has become dominant in youth work, which impacts on the methods used and creates a controlling purpose.

Prescribing outputs suggests a focus on the 'delivered' programme (what people do in youth work), and in its informal approach (how youth work is developed) but shifts the focus away from the important question of why youth work is developed. Yet, in generic youth work, *why* youth work is developed must surely sit at the heart of praxis. Without its distinctive value-base in emancipatory and democratic purpose, generic youth work is reduced to the kind of leisure time pursuit that Banks (2010) alerts us to, and which 'delivers' to consumers, rather than practising freedom, through educational process and associational dialogue (Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Ord, 2007).

Constraints in funding bring additional problems by targeting resources towards identified areas, such as unemployment or parenting, and away from the kind of generic youth work that would arguably be attending to those areas as much as any targeted intervention. Instead, possibilities for emancipatory generic practice are reduced in favour of ticking boxes that appear to miss the point (Batsleer, 2008). In one sense, the shifting demands of such outcome driven policy and practice introduces the possibility of funding a type of youth work that further denigrates young people by defining them as a problem. In light of this shifting discourse, some youth work literature predicts the potential demise of generic and

emancipatory forms of praxis (Davies and Merton, 2009; Jeffs and Spence, 2008; Young, 2006). Yet, this study offers hope, in suggesting that generic youth work can include a commitment to emancipatory action through analysis of power relationships as a prerequisite to youth work practice (Batsleer, 2008).

Mertens' transformative paradigm (2005) offered a useful lens through which to consider the potential for learning about equality in youth work because this paradigm takes a more positive than pathologising view of shifting research methodologies that have 'led to reframing research questions to focus on strengths' (Mertens, 2005, p. 106). An example of this was found in young people's experiences of the youth council.

Learning about equality and power relationships in the youth council

Since the 1980's youth participation has included youth work practices that support the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Bessant, 2007; United Nations, 1989). However, a question remains on the extent to which young people's rights to participate in decision making are influenced by adult-led models that sometimes serve as a mechanism of surveillance or control (McCulloch, 2007; Podd, 2010; Shaw and McCulloch, 2009).

Three of the young people in this study were youth councillors who used informal and outreach methods to engage a wider group in service consultations. However, the findings also showed that progress towards increased participation was achieved through hierarchical, adult-lead democratic structures. Adult youth workers directed much of the youth council development while young people had limited autonomy and control. For example, the youth councillors developed creative ways of engaging '*hard to reach*' young people and to identify issues of concern but consultations were framed by strategic priorities for the area and by policy discourse, for example, in regard to concern for 'anti-social' behaviour.

Carole's experiences of the youth council show the complexities of power relations. Carol claimed that the youth council helped young people to make a difference to their own lives and those of other young people:

I became a youth councillor because I wanted to make a difference for young people. Through consultations and stuff like that, not just me individually but as a whole...
...we did surveys across the whole area...we put them in shops...keypad things...
asking what they thought the biggest problem was in their area, like anti-social

behaviour and stuff like that...what they thought about leisure, if it was too expensive or they had problems getting to it...transport and that...we collated all this information and then put it into the youth strategy.

Carol believed that consultation informed development of the youth strategy. This was an important document that set out priorities for youth service development over three years for all public and community sector partners in the area.

Youth councillors engaged in social and political action that was important in ensuring resources were available for young people. Thus, the youth council sought an equal share of resources and 'access to goods and services...such as a safe and healthy environment...the accessibility of buildings and so on' (Baker et al., 2004, p. 36). Yet, Carol was also aware of how adults were powerful in determining possibilities. She was aware that consultations were driven by the interests of specific partner agencies:

[consultation] was through different departments like, the council and like, the police and health.

Yet, in using policy specific language, such as 'anti-social behaviour', Carole also adopted language associated with a discourse that views young people as a problem or a 'nearly' social person, who is not quite adult:

Erm, I remember...we had a Youth Council meeting and we weren't allowed...because we didn't have an adult worker, even though a lot of us were over eighteen.

The young people wanted the meeting to go ahead, but it was cancelled because there was no adult youth worker available. Despite a supportive intention, the locus of power and decision taking was retained by adults. Young people complained but did not challenge this decision or feel empowered to convene the meeting themselves. Reinforcing conformity, young people appeared reliant on, and constrained by, controlling youth workers. I asked Carol how she felt about the cancellation:

Just as if they didn't trust us...'cause we're young people. I don't know why it was cancelled maybe it's the law or something, or a health and safety thing and a worker needed to be there in case anything happened. I don't think that was fair 'cause half of us were over eighteen, so they could have trusted us more.

Carol's comment suggests a lack of reason or explanation as to why a routine meeting was cancelled due to staff absence. Further, despite being over eighteen, Carol believed that she and her friends were not trusted. This called into question the basis on which those potentially powerful collaborative relationships were grounded and the authenticity of the 'youth councillor' role. There was no evidence that the young people were encouraged to consider alternative models of democratic participation and so the youth council mirrored existing democratic structures where those adults in power, retained power.

Yet, the youth council also exemplified power sharing by involving a variety of young people, including some who were described as marginalised or excluded on grounds of race, ability and their experiences of poverty. However, maintaining hierarchical power structures the opportunity for 'a more participatory form of politics' is reduced (Baker et al., 2004, p. 39). Engaging young people in strategic policy making, the youth council can be argued as a new form of participatory youth politics. While this meets Davies' requirements for the balance of power to be tipped in young people's favour, in modelling practice on existing and arguably flawed mechanisms for political participation, the youth council does not appear to go far enough in creating the conditions for equality of power (Baker et al, 2004).

Thus, as in other parts of society, the youth council operated on different levels, based on an adult led and reduced model of democracy (Giroux, 2009). It operated a traditional hierarchy, mirroring existing structures by feeding from local area, to authority wide and then national youth parliament, rather than considering democratic possibilities beyond the vote or by inventing more public forms of participative democracy (Heywood, 2007). These experiences were consistent with research (McCulloch, 2007; Deucher and Maitles, 2008) that highlighted individual benefits but where participation did not facilitate changes in how society viewed or included young people in democratic processes. In some respects this was close to what Baker et al. (2004) have described as, 'liberal democracy...[where]..elections are seen, primarily, as a method for choosing and limiting the power of decisions-makers' (Baker et al, 2004, p. 29) by promoting participation in hierarchical political structures that privilege culturally dominant groups.

Despite progress in personal development, it appears that moves towards social change were limited. As a simulation of adult processes, the youth council did little to challenge negative views or stereotyping young people as deficient to adults (Devlin, 2006; Deucher, 2009; McCulloch, 2007). Indeed, while the existence of a youth council seemed to challenge adult

dominance, its modelling of adult processes weakened this challenge. Power was routinely retained by youth workers in relation to youth council structure and organisation which could help maintain the status quo by perpetuating a *common sense* assumption of adult power over young people. Gramsci (1999) would argue that everyday common sense is part of the hegemony that maintains current configurations of power and offers a compelling means of maintaining a status quo that keeps young people in a subordinate position (Giroux, 2009).

However, this interpretation offers only a partial view of the youth council because the young people gave a very positive account of their experiences that cannot be ignored or explained simply as hegemony. They suggested benefits from participating in the youth council which included working with peers to devise a series of consultation events for schools in order to share information and receive feedback on their proposals for the youth strategy. They also talked about their role in gaining insights from young people who do not routinely participate in consultations and so appeared to build 'productive connections with young people and to have impacts they value' (Davies, 2005, p. 13).

All of the young people in this study who were youth councillors said they were empowered, in control, and cited examples of how policies were changed in response to consultation events or processes. Thus, on a micro level, it appeared that the young people's participation in the youth council did bring changes that had a positive impact on their lives, and on the lives of other young people.

These two interpretations of the youth council present a paradox that is not entirely new or resolvable. On one hand, youth work could help young people to reconfigure democratic possibilities, in and beyond the setting, as part of a wider consultation framework for planning services and changing public opinion about young people. Conversely, youth work appeared to model and reinforce an unequal power dynamic between young people and adults, which dominates popular discourse.

In New World, elements of this paradox helped to create possibilities for change. For example, discussing why meetings were cancelled meant that, over time, meeting procedures were changed as youth councillors were financially supported to attend meetings, without being accompanied by a worker. Their persistence brought micro-level change, which young people suggested was a shift in power and trust that was not evident in their earlier experiences.

This paradox highlights the complexity and subtlety of problem posing methods in educational youth work. By posing cancellation of meetings as a problem, young people took the lead in developing dialogue and a series of critical conversations that, over time, led to micro-level social change. In this sense, questions on how learning about equality is developed in youth work are tied to expressions of power and to thinking about how relationships are negotiated to either facilitate or hinder power sharing.

As a symbol of democracy, it could be that the Youth Council was not just a decision making body that involved young people in seeking the opinions of their peers. Rather, through regular consultation processes and routine meetings, the youth councillors produced strategic plans and negotiated action that embodied youth work processes and strengthened the democratic engagement of young people. Using youth work methods, the youth council appeared to offer a counter hegemony to discourse that currently maintains a discriminating status quo.

In this way, the meaning of the youth council was constructed collaboratively by young people and youth workers and the status quo was challenged through young people's participation in decision-making and service planning. Thus, the youth council and developments in youth participation do not express or define what it means to participate; instead, they invite young people to make sense of, or construct new understandings of, what it means to be a youth councillor.

Participation in the youth council suggested the relationship between adult power and youth power were inextricably connected but not fixed. Instead, the process of decision taking seemed to follow ritualistic, to-ing and fro-ing, over a prolonged period of negotiation. These negotiations appeared as mutually beneficial: young people were empowered to take important decisions; youth workers were empowered to practice critical youth work that facilitated change in power relations.

This added to findings in research by McCulloch (2007) that developed understanding of youth-participation where youth workers routinely, 'make decisions with and alongside, rather than for the young people they work with' (McCulloch, 2007, p. 19). Thus, while youth workers took a leading role in facilitating young people's decision making at New World, they did this in an empowering way and their role changed, as young people took greater responsibility for organising meetings or taking decisions.

In writing about the dialogical nature of youth work, Batsleer (2008) further adds that ‘power gained through conversation is not a matter of giving or taking, but rather a matter of give-and-take...[when]...there *are* moments of concession when existing power relationships shift’ (Batsleer, 2008, p.10). The Youth Council seemed to offer concessionary moments. Yet as identified by Shaw and McCulloch (2009) there remains, ‘an unhealthy tendency towards psychologistic (increasingly genetic) explanations for...individual behaviour...[that]...ignore the obvious truth that individual experience is always embedded in social structure’(p. 5) and sustains unequal social relationships which are ‘rendered invisible’ by focussing on individual, rather than collective power. In turn, this limits possibilities for social change.

Ticking boxes and making a point about equality in youth work

In New World, youth workers appeared to consciously practice Freirian pedagogy. Troubled by the constraints of a banking model of education, Freire (1970, 1996) suggested that, ‘the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers of that world’ (1996, p. 54). Banking education puts the teacher in control of what is learned, in a ‘ready-to-wear approach...[that]...serves to obviate thinking’ (Freire,1996, p. 57). By posing problems and taking the young people’s starting point as the catalyst for dialogical learning, a sense of reality is created to bring new challenges and reduce feelings of alienation where education is developed as, ‘the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination’ (Freire, 1996, p. 63).

At New World, a critical and problem-posing pedagogy was developed through educational youth work methodologies (Harland and McCready, 2012). Youth workers and young people worked together to create knowledge and understanding by learning from and with each other. Framing education in the here and now, focussing on problems in real world situations, as shown in the cancellation of meeting or in following ‘hot topics’ from café conversations, offered a means of raising consciousness and understanding. This emphasised human characteristics and the capacities of young people and youth workers to act in fellowship and solidarity with each other, in order to bring about micro-level change. Becoming conscious, not only of the world and the way knowledge is produced, but of their own capacities to produce new knowledge or understandings, helped young people to change the world (Giroux, 2005; Kinchiloe, 2008; McLaren, 2009).

In pursuit of critical pedagogy, Beck and Purcell (2010) suggest that youth and community work praxis begins when people start to question the situations and realities they live in, and see these as problematic. They argue that new levels of consciousness are achieved as relationships change through dialogue and through a process of co-investigation which creates new knowledge. For example, in New World it would have been easy for young people to opt out or walk away from the unfairness of the decision to cancel the youth council meeting, or for those workers involved to assert their power, yet neither did. Instead, over time they worked together to create new meanings and understandings.

In thinking about the emergence of power and emancipatory practices, Thompson (2003) has suggested that theorising how ideas about equality might be applied in social practices is in the early stage of development. Despite work on human and social rights, there appears to be limited impact in participatory practices among young people, with some clear contradictions in practices that seek to both liberate and contain or control them (see for example, Bessant, 2007; Coburn, 2011; Deuchar and Maitles, 2007; Englund et al, 2011). This is most concerning where:

The radical objectives of ‘participation’ may have been replaced by a participatory policy rooted in maintaining social control over the disenfranchised, who are historically and persistently viewed as either problematic or in need...[and for young people]...the barriers and challenges thus remain largely unchanged from those of a decade ago.

Podd (2010, p. 31)

Thus, current configurations of power and social structure remain flawed (Baker, et al, 2004) as Shaw and McCulloch have also argued:

If young people are seen or constructed in particular ways, then those ways of seeing them might have quite different consequences for the way in which citizenship is seen in relation to *them* – and to what being a citizen might mean.

Shaw and McCulloch (2009, p. 7)

Shaw and McCulloch (2009) suggest current understandings of empowerment as ‘simplicistic propaganda’ (p. 7) and assert a need to ‘think more critically about the relationship between

citizenship, democracy and the political lives of young people' (p. 8). The creation of a political culture is suggested as the route through which to challenge inequality and 'in the face of injustice, exploitation or inequality, it could be argued that dissenting is the only responsible thing to do' (p. 11). Had Carol and her peers not shown dissent, it is unlikely that the circumstances for youth councillors would have changed. Thus, if generic youth work is to sustain its emancipatory purpose, the idea of dissent needs nurturing as part of its mission for equality and social justice.

Yet, Thompson (2003) argues that everyone involved in services that work with people of all ages should be engaged in the challenges of developing emancipatory practice but suggest that, 'we remain a long way from an adequate theoretical understanding of the intricacies and subtleties of promoting equality (Thompson, 2003, p. 43). Thus, this study contributes to the development of youth work practices that promote equality.

Building 'equal' relationships in youth work

Young people's relationships with peers and with adult youth workers were critical features of Davies' Manifesto (2005) and a commitment to association in youth work (Batsleer, 2008; Jeffs and Smith, 2010; Smith 2002; Spence, 2007; Young, 2006). The creation of relationships built on trust is identified as important in facilitating, 'privileged access to...[young people's]... private world' (Spence et al., 2006, p. 33) and where the young people, 'shouldn't need to have their guard up' (Sercombe, 2010, p. 161). This underpins the negotiation of boundaries and where there is potential for new relationships to be forged.

Wenger (1998) has suggested that learning about meaning and understanding are shaped by time and place, by physical environment, by social relationships and by the individual or collective ideas of those involved in the learning process. Thus, understanding of the world is not fixed and people are guided by different ideas or beliefs, or live in different cultural and social circumstances. This creates boundaries and borders between people and practices. If these boundaries and borders are socially constructed, then they may also be socially deconstructed by working within and outside of current discourse to create new ideas or alternative forms of knowledge (Giroux, 2005).

In this research, mixing across cultural and social boundaries helped young people to create new identities and understandings of the world and to learn about difference:

I learned more to be myself...through coming here I got more confidence, I learned how to be like me and then found out that people [the workers and other young people] accepted me for that.

Ryan

Coming up here, you learn to respect people and they give respect back and you interact with different people...but if you were outside and you saw someone...you would have walked passed and you wouldn't have wanted to talk to them because they're different but...coming here teaches you how to communicate with people outwith your group...people who have different styles or like, live in different ways.

Sandra

You get to know people from different countries and different religions and everything...I had a lot of problems with like getting to know people and I didn't trust anybody that I didn't know. Then, through that...[youth exchange]...I just learned everybody's the same, never judge a book by its cover, d'you know what I mean?

Craig

These extracts show how participation in an international exchange and a Disability Sports group, helped young people to accept their emerging identities and raised awareness of difference by encouraging them to mix with different groups. This capacity for crossing borders was important in 'supporting young people to form and express their own identity, as opposed to adopting given identities' (Young, 2006, p. 38). Boundary crossing underpinned the young people's experiences and perceptions of equality by enabling them to 'start to define a distinctive and more autonomous adult identity' (Davies, 2005, p. 13). In this way, youth work contributes to formation of young people's social, emotional and cultural identity.

A selection of cultural styles was present in New World. These were described by the young people, and in literature, as barbies, chavs, emos, girly-girls, Goths, grungers, moshers, metal, neds, normals, rockers and trendies (Bennet, 1999; Bennet and Kahn Harris (2004); Hodkinson, 2005; McCulloch et al., 2006). Building on experiences of different cultural or style groupings in New World, youth workers encouraged young people to socialise and connect across boundaries and so, youth work offered a space for testing new relationships

and identities. Boundary crossing facilitated young people's experiences of difference which helped them consolidate and sustain their current identities or question and develop emerging identities. Seeing boundaries as sites of transformation (Coburn, 2010) suggests the importance of places like New World, where young people can learn about difference in order to discover and redefine themselves.

Batsleer (2008) suggests that 'identity formation remains a key starting point for youth work engagement (p. 24) while it is further proposed that 'facilitating agency means working with people within and beyond their surface identities' (Sercombe, 2010, p. 155). In New World, the deliberate development of opportunities for cultural and social boundary crossing thus, suggested a deep level of educational engagement.

One aspect of this engagement that enhanced the young people's learning was linked to the relationships they formed in youth work. Developed during conversations, initiated in a trusted environment, some participants likened their relationships to kinship and friendship ties. They believed they could talk more openly with youth workers than parents or care workers, and found it easier to get their point across. These feelings of kinship did not mean that professional boundaries were removed; rather, this suggested that relationships in youth work were different to those encountered by young people elsewhere.

Interpreting youth work as a series of negotiated relationships

Jeffs and Smith (2010) suggest that maintaining youth work relationship requires variety and is contextualised by the environment in which the youth work takes place. In New World, relationships were built in informal spaces where relationships began in café conversations.

I think [youth workers] understand you more than your parents do... 'cause like you can tell them some stuff that you don't want to tell your parents...and they'll like tell you, like give you advice and that. But if you were to say to your parents about it... they wouldn't take it the same way as they [youth workers] take it. I think they would just kind of go off their nut [say], "Go to your room". But in here, they just like give you advice, so you don't need to go through all that and upset your parents. But I think like...they're...I think they're like kind of family if you know what I mean...they're kinda aunties or big sisters or older brothers...

Mags

The informal nature of practice meant that Mags comments about youth workers as being like a trusted family member were typical, and indicative of a level of the love, care and solidarity that underpinned formation of close relationships (Baker et al, 2004). This enhanced feelings of belonging which Davies' (2005) asserts as important in social and peer relations. Davies (2005) also highlights that workers 'negotiate and re-negotiate the terms of engagement with young people so that youth work's distinctive style and processes can be allowed to develop' (Davies, 2005, p. 9). Thus, learning about difference by mixing across boundaries requires prolonged involvement, similar to Putnam's metaphor of league bowlers where, 'regular participation with a diverse set of acquaintances...[brings]...a form of sustained social capital that is not matched by an occasional pick-up game' (Putnam, 2000, p. 113), and foregrounds the negotiation of changing relationships and shifting power balances.

For example, the youth exchange exemplified a long-term project that enhanced social connectedness among young people and youth workers by involving them in programmed sessions or informal conversations where they shared and compared understandings of culture. Cohen (1985) proposed that, in order to value their own culture, people need to stand at the boundary between what is considered normal, and what contradicts normality, in order to become self-aware and to learn about difference. The processes of sharing knowledge and different cultural histories helped participants and workers to see things from new perspectives. Thus, for some young people the youth exchange meant that their views changed as they revised earlier perceptions, while for others, their views did not change but they did develop or increase their knowledge and understanding of difference.

The young people formed a series of relationships that were negotiated over time. The changing nature of these relationships suggested that simply attending the youth project to engage in pleasantries was not enough, and that short term participation might not bring the required investments in time, commitment or obligation that Putnam (2000) suggests as important in developing sustainable social relationships. It is also argued:

The power of youth work is in the quality of the relationship between the youth worker and the young person...[where]...unlike many other professional relationships, youth work operationalises friendship-type relating styles, overtly pursuing a more equal style of relationship.

Sercombe (2010, p. 24)

This kind of relationship seems particularly cogent where concerns have been raised about the fragility of relationships between young people and adults (Williams, 2009). This study shows that, in youth work, relationships between young people and youth workers are not fragile at all. Empirical evidence supports Sercombe's assertion that these relationships were not like other professional relationships by suggesting different kinds of connection that helped young people to negotiate changing power relations and perspectives for understanding.

Sokolova and Szpacowicz (2007) suggest 'negotiation is a process in which two or more parties aim to settle what each shall give and take in a transaction between them' (p. 471). They outline a variety of strategies such as argument, appeal or demonstration that are used to negotiate achievement of goals. In this study, negotiated elements of practice were based on respectful transactions between young people and youth workers:

The development of negotiated relationships between young people and youth workers, based on mutual respect is a defining feature. In the process of relationship building, the emphasis is upon the active participation of young people.

Spence et al, (2006, p. 1)

This idea of negotiated relationships based on mutual respect was important because it neither assumes, nor takes those relationships for granted. Examining the contribution of negotiation to participation in New World raised a question on whether negotiation could be as critical to the formation of relationships, as the voluntary principle is to attendance.

Five Stages of negotiation in one youth work setting

Processes of negotiation have a natural history in youth work and so the negotiated nature of practice that was evident in New World was not unusual, yet, it was unexplored. Young people's learning was routinely based on a series of transactions that were negotiated with friends or youth workers (see Ord, 2009 on Dewey, 1938; 1963). These transactions were not uniform and I identified a five stage process of negotiating new roles and relationships with each other and with youth workers. These five stages were generated through two parallel processes first, in considering how relationships were negotiated and second, in considering the nature of those relationships. I concluded that the negotiation process was staged as: conflict, challenge, change, consciousness and co-operation:

- **Conflict** was experienced in the early stages of participation, when their relationships with other young people and youth workers were tested. For example, when they were spoken to about their behaviour they sometimes talked back to staff or used put downs on others and this appeared to create conflict and tension in their relationships.
- **Challenge** was experienced when young people engaged in activities with people they had not previously engaged with, or when they participated in new activities, which called into question their existing world view. For example, when they befriended someone from another country or whose abilities were different to their own, this challenged hitherto understandings of the world and connections with others.
- **Change** was experienced when the level of challenge caused them to change their opinion, behaviour or world view. For example, when they changed from running around for a laugh or to attract youth worker attention to sitting with youth workers, engaged in serious conversations about life, work, and the future.
- **Consciousness** was raised and experienced when young people were empowered to build their own ideas and to take responsibility for their own and collective actions. For example, when they became aware of their capacity to engage in decision making that could lead to social action, or micro-level change.
- **Co-operation** was experienced when their relationships with youth workers or young people shifted towards power-sharing, and they acted together for a common purpose. For example, in working together to raise funds or develop programmes when young people became volunteers or peer educators.

These five stages of negotiation appeared important in facilitating connectivity across boundaries on three levels:

- among young people with each other;
- between young people and youth workers;
- between interests in youth work and interests that young people identified in other parts of their lives.

By facilitating their capacity to choose the kind of person they wanted to be, and the kind of relationships that they wanted to develop, negotiating across boundaries in New World contributed to the formation of young people's identities and to their development of agency.

Yet, identifying five stages in negotiation does not mean these are easy to predict or measure. For example, some young people took longer than others to negotiate a connection with young people who were previously regarded as different to themselves, to become a volunteer or to decide this was not something they wanted to do. Rather than being a fixed or linear process, these stages could offer a flexible way of evaluating progression towards new roles or understandings.

For example, young people could reflect on how they negotiated new social and cultural connections in youth work which contributes to their capacity for enhanced connectedness now, and in future. By recognising and reflecting on shifting levels of conflict, challenge, change, consciousness and co-operation, it may be possible for young people to consider how their relationships have progressed and how to negotiate future transactions or make progress in their relationships in and beyond youth work.

In addition to learning about how to negotiate relationships through argument, appeal and demonstration (Sokolova and Szpacowicz, 2007), learning about possible stages in the negotiation process may also be important in the longer term, by contributing to understanding of how relationships are negotiated in generic youth work settings, but also in those environments where participation is not entirely voluntary, or where the voluntary principle is compromised, such as in schools or prisons.

These five stages also appear to strengthen youth work's emancipatory purpose by offering a framework for empowering young people through a negotiated, rather than pre-determined or adult-led process. In circumstances where the young person is the primary client, it is important to understand that while making a contribution, it is wrong to claim causal relationships because outputs and outcomes cannot be fully determined by people or agencies that operate outside of the negotiation process. If these stages hold good in other settings, then processes of negotiation may be an important aspect of youth work methodologies which bring different outcomes depending on the starting point, aspirations and capacities of those involved. Thus, drives to measure the short-term outputs of youth work are only part of the story and do not fully capture the value or value base of youth work. Rather, a variety of

measures is needed, including quantitative ‘number crunching’, qualitative narratives and increased levels of practice based research, in order to assess the youth work contribution.

So what...now!?!

This research identified that young people’s perspectives about equality changed, or were refined, over time. Inequalities were challenged in the youth council, and learning about difference was developed in the youth exchange and DSG. Despite asserting the importance of equality, social justice and human rights, a lack of research about equality in generic youth work is a problem. This study suggests that, in addition to understanding *what* and *how* youth work is developed, understanding *why* is also important. It confirmed practice as, ‘committed to challenging and confronting inequality and not accepting that it is inevitable’ (Ord, 2007 p. 119) and showed generic youth work as helping young people to understand difference and to challenge inequalities and as such, contributes to wider equality work.

Emphasising the importance of negotiation establishes youth work as a co-operative process that can be configured in generic settings or even in places where the voluntary principle is compromised. So long as core aspects of educational youth work as detailed in literature are present (see for example, Banks, 2010; Batlseyer, 2008; Coburn and Wallace, 2011; Davies, 2005; Harland and McCready, 2012; Ord, 2007; Sercombe, 2010; Spence et al, 2006; Young, 2006), a process of co-operative negotiation, makes it possible to engage in youth work in a variety of settings, that otherwise might not be considered as educational youth work.

However, more research is needed in order to check the veracity of these claims.

If we aspire to create a more equal and fairer democratic society, Baker et al. (2005) suggest a need for radical social change. An extension of power-sharing emancipatory youth work practice could facilitate social change in terms of age-based discrimination against young people. In this sense, investing in generic educational youth work is not only transformational for individual young people, but can also contribute to transforming the world, by working towards fairer and more equal social relations, as part of a negotiated emancipatory praxis.

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