

## Talk at UK Youth Girls Work Conference, Tania de St Croix, 08/09/09

I am not an experienced speaker and this is way out of my comfort zone! So why did I say yes? Because I don't think we face-to-face workers speak up often enough. Because I love youth work and girls work. And because they are under threat.

The kind of youth work I love is not the special events, it's what I try to do every night: usually improvised, mostly informal, sometimes chaotic, often creative and always questioning.

And I believe this is a time in youth work history when all of us who practice this kind of youth work need to take action if we want it to survive.

### **Youth work is being stolen from us.**

Under threat are all those valuable, informal, fun, exciting and deep experiences that come from spending real, long, quality time with young people.

New Labour has created something I call bureaucratic youth work. It's focussed on paperwork; computers; consuming; recording; monitoring; passing on information.

There is no time to have the kind of rambling discussion you'll remember years later.

No chance to do something at the drop of a hat because someone has an idea and it needs to happen now.

No space to get a group together just because they said they want to.

Bureaucratic youth work is about fitting young people - and those of us who work with them - into manageable and measurable systems. It's about money. It's about the control of young people.

By sharing my own thoughts and experiences I hope I won't come across as being self-involved – but I do want to keep it real. Most of my life, I'm just getting on with it, trying to do decent youth work.

Through my involvement in the network, In Defence of Youth Work, I have found out that my experience and my views are not unusual. I am not speaking on behalf of anyone, but my views are closest to those expressed by the open letter entitled In Defence of Youth Work which I have copies of here.

Some of you will disagree with my views. All of us here have our own experiences and many of you will have already thought deeply about the issues I am talking about, and I hope some of you will share your thoughts.

Is there such a thing as bureaucratic youth work? Are **you** spending more and more time at a computer? Or – is your organisation resisting these changes?

I will start with three specific examples of how youth work is becoming more controlling and more unequal.

### **(1) Youth work is increasingly 'targeted' at groups identified as problematic.**

Targeting is not new. The history of youth work is full of examples of groups seeking to help or control so-called troublesome young people.

This has been formalised in local authority youth services. Young people who take part in youth work are labelled as being 'at risk'. Sometimes this couched in neutral language, for example the 'Positive Activities for Young People' or PAYP. I am partly funded by PAYP, and so there is a whole list of risk factors on our membership form, and we are meant to attach our members to the risk factors. The list includes really nebulous things like 'family issues' – which of **us** *doesn't* have at least one family issue, for goodness sake! The category of 'NEET', or Not in Education Employment or Training, is my least favourite. Because it is a set of initials saying what someone is not. What kind of a way is that to refer to someone? But workers say, 'I'm targeting the NEETS', or 'Sarah is NEET'.

I was a so-called 'NEET' between the ages of 17 and 19. I spent that time living independently, doing voluntary work, learning to deal with the dole, going on demonstrations, organising protests, living on a tiny budget, attending a youth group, caring for myself, dealing with depression – I was surviving. I would not have liked to be defined by what I was *not* doing. Least of all by my youth worker.

Targeting results in more resources going to young men, mostly because young men make up the majority of so-called offenders. Working with young men, especially those who are involved in gangs or guns or crime, is perceived as cool, cutting edge, a bit dangerous and brave. Working with young women is often seen to be an easier option. Most financial resources and skilled workers follow the boys.

I don't believe this unequal resource allocation even benefits the boys - it can stigmatise them, and may even show them they can earn trips out and attention by being aggressive.

Targeting is sometimes aimed at girls, but (similarly) in a way that labels them, for example as anti-social or at risk of pregnancy.

Working with a specific group because they have identified a need or a wish to meet together is a completely different thing – getting together as a group of young unemployed people, or a group of pregnant young women or whatever, can be a supportive and life affirming experience. Targeting - on the other hand – is when programmes are imposed from above 'for young people's own good'.

## **(2) Funding for youth work is usually linked to accreditation**

This calls into question whether we can call ourselves **informal** educators. I get the impression that girls are seen as an easy target for structured programmes and accreditation. Detached worker Graeme Tiffany has spoken about the pistachio effect – that when you eat a bag of pistachios, you go for the easiest ones to open first, then you might go for those ones that are closed up, or you might even throw them away. Graeme argues that this is how many youth workers treat young people – that to fill targets, we will first seek young people who are willing to do accredited courses. The young people who are most marginalised from education may resist structured programmes, and the temptation will be for some workers not to bother with them.

Young women *can* be perceived as the easiest nuts to crack, and in my experience girls

*are* generally more willing than boys to spend some of their spare time doing accredited courses. This does not prove that they like or value accreditation. We should ask ourselves *why* young women are interested. There is a danger of us taking advantage of the fact that young women are often conditioned to be helpful. Some of the young women I work with know it helps with funding and I get the impression they do the courses to help me out – I do at least try to make it worth their while.

Some young women tell me that if we are doing something directly educational their parents let them come. So, I can see there are some potential benefits, but I do feel that some accreditation is wasting the time I have with these young people. Time wasting is not a neutral issue. Most young people have little or no money of their own, and time is their most precious resource. So keeping young women busy with meaningless qualifications is a way of controlling them.

It is interesting that since accredited outcomes, working with girls is suddenly that bit more attractive to some youth workers in mixed settings. Young men are generally more likely to resist getting involved. We should not just be asking why young men are not interested but also whether we are taking advantage of young women.

### **(3) Young people's details are no longer kept confidential.**

In local government in England, and in the voluntary sector if you get local government funding, your participants' details are transferred to an online database and shared across the local authority and Connexions partnership. The times and dates each young person attends our sessions or meets us for a chat is also usually recorded on these databases.

This abuses the young people's trust in us.

The national database Contact Point has now been set up, and it is possible for hundreds of 'cleared' workers in some areas to look up any child in the UK.

Contact Point contains the name, address, date of birth, doctor and educational institution of every single child in the UK. It also gives details on agencies that are working with the young person. Some information is screened so it can't be seen without special permission. This includes things like the addresses of young people whose parent has escaped domestic violence. However, the screening is unlikely to be foolproof. There will eventually be tens of thousands of workers cleared to use Contact Point. It is highly unlikely that none of these could be corruptible. And we have all heard about databases and laptops being lost or left on trains.

We shouldn't forget that these databases are set up and run by private companies.

My organisation receives local government funding. Without it we would struggle to survive. We do give our members and their parents the choice of whether to have their details shared with the local authority. This means we can claim for less so-called outcomes than we actually achieve.

I have noticed that most projects do not give young people that choice. Even where there is a tick box on the membership form, I have heard workers, including people I respect, saying, "Oh just tick that box for me will you, it helps us get funding" without explaining what it's about. And how many young people read small print?

It interests me that while some of the young people I work with say 'no' to information sharing, more than half say 'yes'. Most likely because they know it helps with our funding. I am worried that young women may be more likely than young men to agree to their details being held on databases. As with accreditation, it is young women who are more easily controlled.

But I don't want to paint a picture of young women who passively accept everything! Many young women I work with *do* object to increased monitoring.

'Sarah' comes to every session but never signs her name on my attendance sheet.  
'Shami' told me very politely that my membership forms are 'a bit nosey and long'.  
'Danielle' said she'd rather go home than get another evaluation form filled in.  
'Demi' sneaks off when we start doing the recorded outcomes at the end of term.  
'Leila' and her mum complained about the section asking what her sexuality is.

Young women do have views on our policies and practices, and we should engage them in debate. But it's hard for us to be unbiased when we know, and *they* know, we can lose funding or our job if we don't get the paperwork in.

**These changes – the targeting, the accreditation and the databases – are only three of many, many changes that threaten youth work.**

**When I say youth work is threatened, I mean the kind of youth work which helps to liberate young people rather than domesticating and controlling them.**

We should not be surprised that youth work is used by the government to control young people. We live in a capitalist society. Capitalism is bound to benefit the most powerful – that's what it's designed for.

As the songwriter Ani DiFranco sings about capitalism 'it's as easy as breathing for us all to participate'. And so, bureaucratic youth work has become normal to many of us workers. Some of us even find it easier than direct work with young people. I am sure I'm not the only one who has been so behind on my paperwork that I am actually relieved sometimes if a session with young people is cancelled and I can get on that computer. Numbers and outcomes have become such a huge part of our job. They affect our methods and they measure our worth.

Youth workers in local government are especially pressurised, whether overtly or covertly, to go along with the new systems. Here's what some detached workers from around the country have told me:

*"I get told, 'targets, targets, targets' continuously, I go into my workplace and I'm told, 'have you met your contacts, have you met your recorded outcomes, have you met your accredited outcomes?'"*

*"There is this massive, massive, massive push for targeted work and there's this massive thing, like for CAFs: 'You haven't done any CAFs, each person needs to do x number of CAFs.' ... there's no choice."*

*"If you didn't meet your targets, you go into capability, it becomes an issue for your job. Because you may be doing good youth work in your area but if you're not*

*showing that you're meeting your targets, you're not doing your work. That's how they perceive it."*

And I say - We are being corrupted.

The principles we had as youth workers have gone out the window. Can we really say young people engage voluntarily when many of them have been sent to us by their school, job centre or probation service? Can we say we are young people led when we focus on targets and accreditations? Can we say we respect confidentiality when many of us pass on young people's information to be put onto huge databases?

As part of my detached work I visit youth clubs and I have worked in a few areas of the country over the last few years.

It's noticeable that many youth clubs are open less, more time is spent on structured work, and more time on paperwork. But some things have not changed. The pool table, music studio and computer games are still surrounded by young men. Football is still the most popular sport for youth groups, still hugely dominated by boys. Young men get the bulk of the resources. Young men go on most of the trips and residential.

Girls are still excluded, except of course those who help us meet our outcomes by joining youth parliaments and taking part in short courses.

In this context, I would guess that for many of us, girls work can be a lonely thing to do. People look at me strangely when I say I am doing a project just for girls.

For example. I do a girls only project every summer to bring young women together from different estates.

The boys say, that's sexist!

Some youth workers say, ok but when are you doing the boys one?

Funders say, are the girls at risk of pregnancy or crime or have they got problems at home, and can you tell us their names and addresses and their risk factors?

Some colleagues say, 'oh that sounds *nice*', implying it will be easier than the 'real' work of tough boys.

Girls are still oppressed and dominated and need spaces to explore the issues that affect them. But as a worker on the ground it feels like girls work is no more understood today than it was when I first started in youth work.

Many feminist women workers have been forced out of youth work, or got tired of fighting, or just don't like the way things are going. I have seen so many amazing youth workers leave.

And so I would say those of us who are younger or newer to youth work, who have mostly worked under the New Labour government, need to take our turn in fighting. Alongside more experienced women, we need to fight for girls work.

**If we are in favour of girls work and youth work that challenges and liberates both**

**young people and ourselves, rather than a youth work which controls, then we need to stand up and speak out.**

I have just been reading Patrick Califa on 'coming out'. Patrick explains coming out as a complex experience related not just to sexuality. It is about accepting and celebrating one's own identity.

It can be:

*“Something disturbing we feel we must bring forward – at first into our own consciousness, then to a community of like-minded people where we hope to find welcome, and finally to outsiders.”<sup>1</sup>*

I relate to this as a woman and as a youth worker.

So let's look at our identities. Who are we as youth workers? Why did we first get involved? Why are we still involved now? What do we believe in? What can we put up with? What would we fight for?

**As well as reflecting, we should find support, or as Califa puts it, a community of like-minded people.**

And there is at the moment a groundswell of youth workers expressing opposition to the bureaucratic and managerial changes taking place.

The network called 'In Defence of Youth Work' is just one place where workers are coming together to gain support from each other. Feminist Webs is another inspiring example.

It isn't always easy to be part of a network and there will be differences of opinion. But it is a rich experience to feel less alone. Most of us feel stronger for meeting.

One person said:

*“I made a couple of notes for myself – one was to stand up and be counted! The act of me being here is a political act”*

Another said:

*“Why should we hide? I don't want anyone telling me I can't be here.”*

Feelings of relief, strength and excitement when we meet together are no coincidence.

Although we all do talk and reflect with colleagues, the space for this is diminishing. Time spent on recording and monitoring does not come from nowhere, it gets taken from time we could be spending with young people or with our colleagues.

At a detached youth workers' conference last year, one very experienced worker talked about how the database recording systems are affecting team work. I found her point really interesting so I will share what she said.

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1 Patrick Califa (2002) Speaking sex to Power: The Politics of Queer Sex, Cleis Press p162

*"It's a bit of a solo task feeding in to a database. One of our service managers said, 'we don't need any paper any more, we don't need to do those recording sheets, just feed it in to the computer, it's all on there', and for me I think it's a real concern because, certainly for detached youth workers, at the end of the session we usually debrief on the streets or in a cafe, and for me that dynamic between workers reflecting on their work and discussing what they're doing and why they're doing it and analysing it, is really key, it's not just about numbers and ethnicity and age, it's actually about 'how am I co-working?'"*

I've even heard of a youth service where people were banned from meeting with each other outside of formal monthly meetings – which were of course filled with the agenda of senior management.

So as well as young people being controlled by bureaucratic systems, youth workers are controlled too. Can we say we are empowering young people when we ourselves are disempowered? It is vitally important that we take part in discussions with others, even if that has to be on the internet under a false name!

Angela Davis said,

*"The challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not to demand equal opportunity to participate in the machinery of oppression. Rather, it is to identify and dismantle those structures in which racism continues to be embedded."*

Applying this to youth work and girls work, we need to think about the wider picture, by exploring and challenging the policies and politics that cause changes we don't like as youth workers. I think Angela Davis is also talking about not becoming part of the system – that if you become a manager it doesn't mean you stop asking difficult questions and acting on principle. As long as we have to operate in a hierarchical system, us face-to-face workers need managers who don't become part of the machinery.

We should not be surprised when we need to fight for a youth work that is informal and open-ended. That kind of youth work doesn't make a profit and won't fit neatly onto a spreadsheet. So we will probably always need to fight for it. Just as we women still need to fight for the freedom to walk home at night without being scared, or the opportunity to grow up without thousands of judgemental comments being made about how we look. To borrow from Angela Davis again, sexism is presented as a battle we have won, but no struggle is linear.

Any one of us can challenge bureaucratic systems in our everyday work. As a face-to-face worker I am unlikely to change the world. But the Zapatistas in Mexico have a motto,

***We do not take power – we exercise it.***

We can all exercise power in our own lives. For me,

- I can insist on giving young people a choice about information sharing
- I can support colleagues who speak out,
- I can try to create useful and inspiring spaces for young women
- And I can try to put positive relationships with young people back at the centre of my work.

As someone wrote recently in support of the In Defence of Youth Work campaign:

*“It doesn’t matter how much you polish and decorate your systems, your procedures or your policies, it is the relationship between worker and young person that is the most essential factor for effective youth and community work.”<sup>2</sup>*

Thanks for listening.

**Note:**

*If you are interested in this issues raised in this speech and you have not yet got involved with the 'In Defence of Youth Work' network, have a look at:*

*<http://indefenceofyouthwork.wordpress.com/>*

*for discussions, to see the open letter, sign up and get information about regional meetings.*

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<sup>2</sup> 'God's lonely youthworker', comment on blog: <http://community.cypnow.co.uk/forums/p/1250/3220.aspx>