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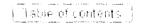- News releases
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Chapter 5: Disaffected Young People

Introduction

5.1 This chapter aims to provide a description and analysis of some of the approaches being developed to tackle the problem of disaffected young people, at both national and local levels and from different angles. There is no definitive way of encapsulating the problem of this particular population group, since disagreements abound about how the problem should be formulated. It is a double bind of partnership working across boundaries that working arrangements can easily founder because of a failure to discuss and agree the basic terms of reference, but that such agreement may be forthcoming only as a result of partnership working. Here we use working definitions, which are potentially useful in helping those involved to agree the language and focus of the problem they are trying to solve and the work they need to undertake in order to solve it. The elements are as follows;

5.2 **Young people.** The age range included in this term generally seems to be between 14 and 26, although individual initiatives and projects tend to select a narrower range within those parameters. Boundary lines are difficult partly because many of the problems encountered by people of these ages have their origins much earlier in life, and this is acknowledged particularly by those interested in preventive work. On the other hand, law-based distinctions between 'child' and 'adult', particularly important in education and social services, create divisions which seem artificial to other service providers. Responsibility for action can thus be fragmented simply because a young person has hit a particular age barrier, and by some reckoning exited from the relevant category.

5.3 **Disaffected.** The idea of 'disaffection' is closely linked with that of exclusion, that is, being outside the mainstream of society. There are several elements to this:

Lacking a sense of identity; having a sense of failure;

'Disturbed', 'depressed', 'difficult' young people, with social and emotional problems;

Behaviour - crime, misbehaviour, drugs, lack of social skills; harming (or potentially harming) selves and/or others;

Not exercising civil/democratic rights (uninterested, uninvolved and unregistered) or social/economic rights (poor knowledge of, and

city works, and provides and opportunity for decision-makers in the city to hear their views. As well as creating this opportunity for dialogue, the programme is also intended as a means of personal development; participation in group work, role plays and presentations are among the diverse activities on the ten day programme.

5.81 The key issue to be addressed was how to connect young people to the life of the city. Although the programme is not explicitly targeted towards 'disaffected' young people, the main requirement for participation in the scheme is the ability to communicate, as well as being keen and committed. Academic qualifications and ability are irrelevant, and, in practice, some children in danger of exclusion from school have been included. In the evaluation report for the first year of the project, four objectives were identified:

> Schools would create greater links with private, voluntary and public sector organisations in the city;

> Key decision-makers and opinion formers would hear and learn from regular and informed feedback from young people;

> Young people would begin to understand their potential role in the future of their city;

> The city would benefit from a source of more articulate and better informed young people, equipped to participate on youth boards and other consultative forums.

5.82 These aims clearly link the issue of young people to the citizenship and democracy issues identified at the beginning of this chapter, which are in turn linked to questions of rights and duties identified, for example, in the UN Charter on the Rights of the Child.

5.83 The 'Your Turn' project originated with an officer of the City Council Education Department with particular responsibility for 'disaffected' and excluded schoolchildren. She began to develop the idea of a youth version of Common Purpose after attending a Common Purpose course herself. This was supported by the Council, and the work developed as a joint effort between the Council and Common Purpose.

> The Council provided the support, practical back-up and knowledge of its own education system, enabling schools and then pupils to become involved. (Pupils were chosen for their leadership potential rather than their academic achievement).

> Common Purpose used its experience of running the programme and its network of contacts, including many former Common Purpose 'graduates', to develop a special programme for these young people.

> The participants are expected to feed back to their schools and to continue to make a contribution, both while they are still at school and afterwards in their future lives. It is seen as an investment for the future.

5.84 In Birmingham, schools were selected from both the public and private sectors, and ranged from inner city to outer estate locations. The pupils involved in the first year were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and were evenly divided between boys and girls. The 'host' organisations included a Housing Action Trust, the City Council, the police, Cadbury's, Barclays, housing associations, health organisations, and the Careers and Business Education Partnership.

5.85 The cost of the programme, which included transport, resource packs, etc., was largely funded by Barclays and through bursaries. The

Council and the host organisations made considerable inputs 'in kind', in staff time, the provision of facilities and refreshments and so on.

5.86 Each day of the programme was different, with a mixture of presentations and participative and problem-solving exercises. Ground rules for behaviour were established at the beginning, and feedback obtained at the end. The young people learned - and asked questions - about how the City Council works, how to set up a small business, issues around health rationing and drugs, dealing with crime and punishment, homelessness and many other issues.

5.87 Most of the participants found ways of feeding back their experience to their schools, supported in each case by the school head (this was vital to the success of the programme). In some cases, 'role models', for example of Asian women working in banks, enabled participants to widen their horizons. While an underlying aim, at least as far as the Education Department was concerned, was to get young people to value education; to help them to see how education (in the broadest sense) can help people both to get more from, and to give more to, society. The evaluation shows that real learning took place, with greater understanding of the problems faced by decision-makers, and a clearer idea of how they themselves could ask questions, make challenges and express their ideas.

5.88 Educating young people for citizenship is clearly a long-term process. It is seen by many, including central government, as an increasingly important element in engaging people with the democratic process. In that context, this programme is clearly a contribution, though with exactly what effect is as yet unclear. However, there is a world of difference between an innovative project for a few young people, and a new approach which offers those development opportunities to all. To do the latter, issues about the sustainability of the programme over time have to be addressed.

5.89 Enthusiasts could be found at all levels in the first year or two of the programme, but the work is quite resource-intensive, involving a lot of nurturing, development and networking. The City Council was able to dedicate resources for this at the beginning, but this was not seen as a long-term input. Yet the programme depended on the links, knowledge and experience of the Council just as much as on the different inputs provided by Common Purpose and the high level 'graduates' who contributed in the early stages. Despite the rhetoric, in reality the issue of 'disaffected young people' is at the top of very few organisations' agendas; other priorities and could push this programme aside.

5.90 The benefits for young people of involvement in the programme are somewhat intangible, as they are with much leadership development training. Whilst this does not stop the best companies and public organisations investing in developing the leadership capacities of their own staff, engaging those processes for the wider public has fairly daunting resource implications. Considerable faith is needed to keep the existing levels of commitment going.

5.91 The school curriculum is another potential problem. It is increasingly tight, leaving little space for 'extra-curricular' activities. School headteachers needed imagination and commitment to see that a programme such as this could contribute to the overall education both of the actual participants and, through dissemination, more widely in the school. This had to be balanced against the 'loss' of ten days out of the school year. However, the enthusiasm of the school, together with careful programming to ensure that the same lessons are not missed each time (and a commitment from the pupils to make the lessons up later) has so far meant that this has not been a problem in

practice.

5.92 Future funding is uncertain. Each year funders have to be sought to cover the £15,000 cost of the programme. In practice, the resources have so far been forthcoming, and the programme does appear to be becoming well-established. It is worth noting that funds have to be brought together from a variety of sources, including the City Council, and that it is very rare for the money to be granted for more than a year at a time. However, the Common Purpose graduates who act as hosts and speakers on the programme, without whose co-operation the whole enterprise would collapse, have sustained their commitment and enthusiasm despite the time and effort required. The programme is very dependent on good will; so far this continues to exist.

"It's a high cost for a hit" (interview).

"People like to be seen to be doing things with kids, but it does wear off. And the quality of the programme depends on the variety and standard of the people involved. If we want the top people, you can only have them a few times." (interview)

5.93 While there was some sympathy with the idea that this programme would have synergy with participating agencies' agendas, it is certainly not at the centre of most agencies' agendas. However, it fits with the 'community programmes' of some private sector businesses, such as banks, while public service agencies, such as the police and the fire services, appear to have gained real benefit from receiving direct feedback from young people about how they perceive (and sometimes misperceive) their services. The scheme organiser though, felt that on the whole the benefit to providers and participants was two-way.

Conclusion

5.94 This is an interesting and innovative case-study which specifically addresses the issues of active citizenship among young people in a new way. It has had benefits for the participants themselves, for the participating organisations, for schools and (probably) for parents. However, many factors weigh against its continuation unless the question of involving young people, and in particular 'disaffected' young people becomes a priority in practice as well as on paper for all the organisations which could be involved. This is part of the developmental and preventative agenda, which is difficult to measure and brings with it (so far) few tangible rewards for those who become involved. On its own, it will not solve the deep-seated problems affecting young people. However, it is a contribution to the idea that young people ought to be involved in finding their own solutions and, indeed, in identifying their own problems. As the other two case studies in this research have also shown, this is vital for success.

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