

‘Embrace unashamedly the therapeutic qualities and benefits of youth work to young people and communities’

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ABSTRACT

Young people have experienced serious distress and disruption due to the recent pandemic, leaving mental health issues at an all-time high among this group. Open access youth work, a method of social and personal learning for young people, is often undervalued and displaced, yet is well suited to facilitate therapeutic intervention and support to young people in informal settings. Open access youth work enables strong associations, friendships, support and openness to discussing young people’s mental health issues and feelings across social and economic divides. By creating open, non-judgemental, yet challenging, space for young people under the supervision of qualified and experienced practitioners, their worries and observations about life can be accessed, discussed, shared and demystified. Serious and diagnostic illness can be reported and referred, with low moods and depression managed by the young people themselves. A great deal of public space is under-used, and

it may be time for places such as schools and colleges to be seriously considered as potential enablers for youth workers to do what they do best.

INTRODUCTION

Young people’s mental health has been a concern to many since the coronavirus pandemic, and ways in which to address this have been discussed by parents, teachers, academics, medics and youth workers on a global scale. The impact of stress, isolation, reduced education, fear, loss and adversity has left many young people with associated trauma and long-term stress. Despite the growing concerns for them, little has been done, in practice, to improve the situation. Youth work as a methodology can robustly and uniquely help young people to identify, address and manage depression and low mood in their lives and to overcome some of the most challenging experiences and feelings they have. However, a consistent lack of funding and physical space for youth work practice has left young people

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little opportunity to participate in suitable projects and programmes. This article argues that youth work is best placed to focus on the personal and social development of young people in centres and clubs and that this ought to be a serious and significant part of local communities, with support from schools, colleges and universities who inevitably have space and resources currently inaccessible.

Towards the end of 2021 I concluded a seminar to youth and community workers by saying, ‘Embrace unashamedly the therapeutic qualities

and benefits of youth work to young people and communities.’ My PhD thesis the year before made a case for ‘open access’ youth work which, for those who are wondering, means centres or clubs where young people, albeit supervised, can spend time being young people, finding out who they are, what they want and how the world works.

OPEN ACCESS YOUTH WORK

The purpose, aims and potential of open access youth work have long been interrogated, undermined, contested and misunderstood across social and educational platforms. Practitioners and educators have found this an endless struggle, consistently competing with target-specific work which has left some psychological and identity crises amongst colleagues and practitioners. Decision-makers and funders have preferred the more statistical methods of measuring youth work by checking numbers of ‘clients’, outcomes and costs. These measures are more difficult to calculate when young people have open access to provision.

My belief in youth work is dependent on two key elements. In short, to be a good youth worker you need ‘self-awareness’, and to ensure young people benefit from your practice they need to feel your ‘unconditional positive regard’. Both are modes of conscious practice which prove productive to practitioner and young person. Self-awareness is what we encourage young people to strive for, in order that they can deal with the world and its challenges with confidence and realism – understanding others, and how we are affected by them, as painlessly and honestly as possible. Unconditional positive regard attempts to show complete support and acceptance of a person irrespective of their actions or words – qualities also key to good mental health and well-being.

The global pandemic had an extraordinary impact on young people’s lived

experiences, routines, and patterns, how they socialised and went about their everyday endeavours (Fantigrossi, 2020; Basso, 2021; Berger *et al.*, 2022). It is not difficult to imagine that those most impacted both socially and economically were those who were most vulnerable to start with (Curran *et al.*, 2022). However, Covid-19 did encourage increased mutual support and a more connected, shared world, albeit often one of segregation and separation. Whether the pandemic has left us with a ‘lost generation’ or a ‘switched-on generation’ we are yet to discover, but there is certainly untapped potential to ensure that the mental health and wellness of the generation is catered for at the very least.

YOUTH WORK AND MENTAL HEALTH

Research in the UK has shown that young people’s mental health declined after the first month of lockdown (Power *et al.*, 2020; Watermeyer *et al.*, 2021). ‘Youth’ is a period of complex sensitivity when mental health difficulties can emerge at any time (Castaneda & Selwyn, 2018; Hewitt, 2020) it is no surprise that approximately half of mental health disorders emerge during teen years (Darder *et al.*, 2003) and almost three-quarters emerge by the age of 24 (Ball, 2003). Young people were found to have feelings of defeat, entrapment, shame and hopelessness following the pandemic (Owens *et al.*, 2022).

The pandemic has caused social disruptions which have adversely affected young people’s mental health (Leeb *et al.*, 2020; Owens *et al.*, 2022). In fact, some have suggested that we are heading for, if not already in the midst of, a ‘paediatric mental health crisis that is swiftly becoming its own pandemic’ (Blackwell *et al.*, 2022: 3). An increase in mental distress, exacerbated self-harm, suicidal ideation and a ‘trivialisation’ of ‘mental health problems’ (Berger *et al.*, 2022) add to the difficulties.

Social connectedness increases our life

satisfaction (Leeb *et al.*, 2020; Trimmer-Platman, 2020), and communities do often discover ‘community spirit’ in times of crisis (Batsleer & Duggan, 2020), as was demonstrated during the pandemic. Notions that ‘the context of the pandemic provides a strong foundation and rationale for the profession of community and youth workers’ (Curran *et al.*, 2020: 2) are extremely relevant because youth and community workers use critical pedagogy and values-driven social education approaches to challenge attitudes and values, injustice and to raise consciousness amongst young people. Foundations in youth work are found in association, friendship and support (Batsleer, 2013; Davies, 2013; Trimmer-Platman, 2021). In other words, youth workers are rather good at relationships.

Strong and significant outcomes for young people engaging in open access youth work have been identified (Batsleer, 2013; Davies, 2013; de St Croix, 2016; Hill, 2020; Trimmer-Platman, 2021), which include the opportunity to contribute positively to their communities, making distinct improvements to their lived experiences and providing space of their own in which they are unjudged, even in terms of their mental health. Mindful, self-aware youth citizenship might prove to resolve the ambiguity with which young people view their neighbourhoods and their options. An open access youth space would consider their socio-spatial and socio-economic circumstances, with their experiences becoming contextualised realistically and honestly. In other words, how they feel about themselves and their environment can be explored with youth and community workers and peers safely and constructively, without judgement or prejudice.

Young people claim to be significantly happier, more fulfilled, and interactive because of their engagement in open access youth work. They can articulate what they enjoyed about the space as well as how they benefited from it; they are also acutely aware of the changes that

they identify in themselves since engaging in it. Young people, without question, highlighted significant improvements in their mental health and well-being, having been involved in the open access projects. In most cases, the projects are not meant to address young people’s mental health issues, but they certainly do so, not least by offering approaches which are accessible, convenient, friendly and not stigmatising in any way, thus providing space in which saying you do not feel great, or you are down about something, is possible, normalised and responded to (Hill, 2020; Trimmer-Platman, 2021).

Those who seek counselling for mental health issues may be monitored against targets and outcomes in terms of shifting behaviour, mood or attitudes. Talking about an issue can encourage differing views, problem-sharing, hunches, gut reactions, body language and so on, all telling a tale. So, what young people experience through youth work can be, and is very often, monitored in the same way and is therapeutic. Adolescents need ‘mindfulness, kindness, generosity, self-compassion or the notion of the best possibility’ (Gregor *et al.*, 2022: 7) in order to control both positive and negative emotions. Youth work approaches using these themes ‘could help to strengthen the well-being of vulnerable groups after the pandemic’ (p. 8). No surprise, then, that youth work does this well also.

Academics and practitioners maintain that the role youth work plays in supporting mental health and well-being works best for young people. (Fraser & Blishen, 2007; Batsleer, 2013), particularly when they are encountering mental distress as a result of the problematisation, scapegoating, control and containment that is socially and politically experienced by them (Giroux, 2003; Davies, 2013; de St Croix, 2016; Batsleer *et al.*, 2020). Youth work, offering anti-oppressive approaches, enables a framework of a ‘social model’ (Tew, 1988). Youth work can provide opportunities to develop shared understanding and work towards

collective well-being, thereby opening possibilities for development and change.

LEISURE TIME

Health promotion perspectives on young people’s mental health advocate for ‘meaningful leisure time’ for them (Fredriksson *et al.*, 2018, Hyland, 2020). Adolescence is a formative time, when foundations of future patterns in adult health and leisure are laid. The UN Convention (UNCRC, 1989) continues to uphold the resolution that it is essential to promote and respect a child’s right to participate fully in leisure activities. Fredriksson insists that ‘leisure time must be organised to fit the young people, not the other way round’ (Fredriksson *et al.*, 2018: 7) and concludes that ‘partly structured leisure time activities are well placed to be or to become a health-promoting setting if they take place in a structured environment’ (p. 9).

Youth centres, as leisure time venues have a clear strategy for young people’s participation in and influence from empowerment, democracy, skills development and for growing responsibilities. The pandemic offered opportunities for transformative actions towards implementing life course approaches and recognising there is no health without good mental health (Macmadu *et al.*, 2021). Lockdowns have had a profoundly negative impact on young people and their mental health, and this cannot be ignored (Leeb *et al.*, 2020; Curran *et al.*, 2022; Owens *et al.*, 2022).

PHYSICAL SPACE

When I started life as a youth worker some 35 years ago there was no shortage of youth clubs and centres; in fact, most schools had purpose-built youth centres attached. Some of these places were huge, offering sports, arts and crafts spaces, music rooms and outdoor play spaces – many were built like mini-schools. They were open after school until late and became part of local narratives and communities. Sadly,

as attitudes and priorities changed, government and local authorities came to view youth clubs as non-essential. Youth services were dramatically affected by austerity, particularly in England. A total of 763 youth centres have been closed since 2012, accompanied by 4,544 local authority job cuts (Curran *et al.*, 2022). Youth clubs and centres are few and far between in 2022.

Many schools are considered underutilised as social infrastructure, and calls are made to extend their use (McShane & Coffey, 2022), although some are designed to support wider community possibilities for learning, recreation, health and well-being. Research has identified security and safety as barriers to community use of school buildings (Shamseldin, 2021). Exemplars like those in Denmark and Connecticut have made extraordinary attempts to resource schools for community and informal use and have proven significant determinants of strong community relationships.

Fredriksson (2016) recommends integrated schools in multicultural neighbourhoods and among different cultures, as they create excellent contact and interaction with residents of all kinds as well as positive outcomes, especially for young people. Areas in the USA, following the pandemic, ensured that schools became hubs, in response to the social, emotional and physical needs of young people, utilising resources and adapting community school models (Hestor, 2017). A movement away from schools acting alone and towards active partnership with community entities offered benefits to young people, and their communities made key shifts in some areas, with positive outcomes.

Indeed, ‘culturally responsive trauma-informed community schools that integrate school and community resources to provide evidence-based and restorative practices’ (Fantigrossi, 2020) could be seriously considered in the current climate. Given the lack of available physical space for open access

youth work to take place, and while we are learning lessons from the pandemic, the opportunity is there to respond quickly to the youth mental health crisis by opening up schools, universities and colleges to open access youth provision – undertaken by youth workers. Agreed partnerships can accommodate practice and resources for young people to experience connectedness, empathy and support, to learn about and examine their feelings and well-being, and benefit from the dynamic and unique relationships which open access youth work nurtures.

CONCLUSION

As adults, we are generally, able to understand our mental health issues, and, where possible, we manage them, perhaps by enjoying time with friends, learning a new skill, physical exercise or by simply having our concerns heard and shared (Cleveland *et al.*, 2020). It is likely that whatever works for us will entail going to or being in a specific social or leisure environment (pub, sports centres, evening class), often taking for granted that we can ‘escape’ to be able to be ourselves. Young people deserve the same space and access to an environment which is free of parenting adults, deadlines and expected outcomes, but where they can engage with peers and adults who will meet them where they are at and not where they expect them to be.

Obstacles to open access youth provision usually include space and finance, neither being readily available. However, we have venues with space and resources which are invariably underused. Most do not open in the evenings or at weekends and yet there are thousands of qualified youth workers willing to contribute to improving young people’s lived experiences and future potential. It almost seems that nationally we are missing (or ignoring) the opportunity to set our young people on the road to mental health success, letting them down, and missing opportunities to make a significant difference. ■

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