Bringing young people in from the margins - society's responsibility

European conference on promoting effective transitions to adult life, Cardiff, October 1995

Introduction

I don't think we need reminding of the recurrent historical preoccupation with the behaviour and 'distance' of youth from 'mainstream' societal expectations - *whatever* the social and - "
economic context. Just as Australia's Working Nation document is deeply anxious about the exclusionary implications of youth unemployment, Malaysia is expressing concern about crime, drug misuse and generational discontinuity on account of its runaway economic success and ensuing affluence of its young people.

Which reminds me of Fyvel's observation about British youth in the early 1960s:

> "This assurance of easy employment, and of the money which goes
> with it., (has created) a gap between the young people of today and
> their parents, who in their own young days grew up under the constant
> threat of unemployment, something which the youth of today just
> cannot understand" (Fyvel, 1961, p. 132)   "

These observations are not designed to generate any sense of complacency about the 'social condition' of young people in contemporary European society, but simply to make sure that we consider the *current* predicaments of young people within an awareness of recurring historical concerns. Much of what we may decide to do will hinge on the extent to which we are persuaded that there has been a significant *break* from those traditions - a quantitative or qualitative transformation which demands a serious re-evaluation of recent policy initiatives which have apparently consigned larger numbers of young people than ever before to the margins and to circumstances from which there may be little or no chance of escape.

Let me draw on another recent document:

> "It is easy for adults to romanticise youth and young people while at the same time constructing a policy environment that allows them little scope for action and learning, a media that sensationalises the actions of the few and ignores the majority, and strategic directions that focus on narrow needs, such as education and training. Young people are citizens and they not only have needs for services but also rights, including the right to participate creatively in their communities...
>
> Young people's rights have frequently been overlooked throughout much of the past decade. Instead of increased inclusion of young people in the life of the community, we find harsher and even more paternalistic attitudes to young people making an unwelcome comeback. More discipline, harsher penalties and greater conformity are too often the text of public discussion about young people..." [Foreword, **Youth Policy Platform,** Youth Affairs Council of South Australia, December 1994]

In 1985,1 wrote a short article suggesting that some groups of young people - especially those experiencing protracted unemployment were becoming **'trapped as teenagers',** unable to secure the resources, support and status to make effective transitions into adult life and to take on concomitant adult responsibilities. They were, as a result, continuing to live out teenage life-styles well into their 20s, sometimes into their 30s.

Since then, I have both researched and experienced directly (through continuing practice) the' social condition' of young people, witnessing a steady deterioration in their life circumstances, life-chances and potential for autonomous decision-making.

The simple message that emerges from any analysis of youth policy in the last ten to fifteen years is that it has been driven by *ideological* and economic imperatives, rather than by any rational scrutiny of specific policy development, and particularly analysis of the *inter-connectedness* of different policy arenas in terms of the ways in which they impinge on the lives of young people. A body of research evidence, pointing to the the growing disadvantage and exclusion of a significant *minority* of young people, has been consistently deflected, suppressed and ignored.

This is *not* a residual problem affecting very small numbers of young people which might therefore not be receptive to policy consideration and development. It is a problem which is quite evidently affecting ever-larger numbers of young people, creating a range of issues both for themselves and for wider society.

My intention here is simply to provide a flavour of these processes of exclusion which, no doubt, will be fleshed out and discussed in more depth during this conference.

Education

Training

Employment

Housing

Crime

The consequence has been the steady clustering of disadvantage for a growing minority of young people **[OHP].** We don't really know the numbers (although we are starting to explore them), for these young people are gradually shifted into a somewhat invisible and 'unofficial' world but, in contrast to the majority who still *manage* their transition to adulthood - in terms of personal relationships, independent living and employment - in reasonably conventional ways, these young people find themselves in a 'live for today'[1] environment where the future cannot be planned and in which they are often both perpetrators and victims of contemporary social malaise.

I have argued before that successful transitions are usually contingent upon some blend of the following factors:

* institutional support

* family support

* peer group & cultural pressures

* personal motivation

These can work constructively or destructively, in harmony or in tension with one another. Many of the young people we will be talking about have little or no family support, and experience adverse cultural pressures (even though they may make sense to them at the time). Even if they retain some level of personal motivation towards integration and 'success' for a while, this is often drained out of them or abandoned, as they seek to cope with immediate economic or emotional pressures. *Yet it is from these very young people that we have often also withdrawn constructive institutional support.*

No wonder there is an alienation from official structures of transition and a lack of participation, which leads to a blurring of active exclusion with apparent self-exclusion, evidenced by the self-interested and anti-social behaviour of the socially excluded, allowing arguments to be constructed around the *individualisation,* rather than the structural nature, of the phenomenon of social exclusion. This is yet another version of 'blaming the victim'; instead, it needs to be considered in terms of the idea that "if society abandons its responsibilities to young people, how can we expect young people to hold on to theirs?".

Comment

I think there are four platforms on which we need to construct a renewed vision of how we address the question of the social exclusion of young people.

The economic argument

We are committing enormous, and increasing, economic resources in dealing with the *consequences* of social exclusion [one youth crime; one year's training allowance = £1,500]. There must come a time when we recognise that greater constructive investment in the young will produce probably equivalent savings to the public purse later on: "it is better to build fences at the top of the cliff rather than provide ambulances at the bottom".

The democratic argument

There is massive non-participation by young people in democratic political processes. This, for me, is the feature which most dramatically distinguishes the contemporary condition of youth from that which has gone before. The securing of commitment by young people - particularly those most on the edge - to our democratic processes demands the providing of evidence to them that it is a process worth participating in. For a growing number, that evidence simply does not exist. And the legitimacy of social sanctions, laws, controls, regulations and expectations will be diminished if there is no corresponding set of choices, possibilities and opportunities for young people, which permits them to secure a stake in the social and political order.

The social argument

A key integrating feature of the 'old' transitions was that getting a job was the mechanism by which young people were bound into local family, community and generational networks. If we cannot guarantee employment, then we need seriously to consider whether other forms of intervention (probably based around a 'social' agenda) can serve as equivalent mechanisms. Otherwise, we will witness the emergence of autonomous generational bands, untrammeled by either the controls or the possibilities which accrue from integration with the wider society.

The individual argument

Finally, amidst the rafts of statistics and th cut and thrust of political rhetoric, we are at risk of forgetting the personal pain, demoralisation, desperation and struggle which is the daily experience of those who find themselves - for whatever reasons - at the margins. It is a terrible indictment of some of the most wealthy societies in the world that we are consigning *any* young people to that predicament.

Conclusion

Our task, therefore, is to put in place structures and mechanisms which permit the . restoration of hope and possibility for young people, which re-establish their sense of purpose, which gives them a position and a stake in the social order. This may require reconsideration of the *social* agendas [OHP], which have been systematically subordinated to various (global, national and regional) economic imperatives.

It will demand frameworks which permit attention to be given by professionals at the local level to the *inter-connectedness* of the 'problems' both caused and experienced by 'socially excluded'[1] young people. For, until we accept such inter-relationships and thereby develop cross-departmental responses which address them, institutional policy measures - in, for example, education, training, housing, criminal justice and welfare, which are preoccupied with their own internal efficiency and performance - will continue to operate in isolation and drive more young people to the margins, with negative consequences both for themselves and for the societies in which they live.

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