

Understanding youth policy development: challenges and complexities

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Introduction

There is, today, huge interest in public policies directed towards young people, commonly referred to as 'youth policy', though rarely is this a coherent and integrated concept, and it is one that is even more rarely understood by those outside its orbit. Many within the youth sector now claim some knowledge, expertise and even experience in 'youth policy', yet it remains an elusive, partial and often contested idea. Policies for young people do invariably exist. As I have said many times before, *all countries have a youth policy, through intent, default or neglect!* The absence of intentional or even accidental policies for young people still structures their experience of growing up, getting on and moving forward; increasingly, there are purposeful policies developed and directed at youth, though they are not always positive ones and they do not always stand either alone or together: some may be independent policy initiatives, but others are sub-sections of more overarching public policy. Moreover, some areas of public policy are clearly almost 'naturally' youth-focused (cf education and vocational training), others lean *towards* specific attention to young people (cf youth justice, perhaps youth unemployment, perhaps health), while others arguably lean *away* from youth (cf housing).

This paper/presentation draws heavily from a lifetime of careers in relation to young people – as a youth work practitioner, working in a variety of different ways with a diversity of young people, but especially those more on the margins; as an academic youth researcher who has studied many dimensions of young people's lives, in many different ways; and, increasingly, as a 'youth policy' adviser at many different levels of policy-making and on a host of youth policy issues. Despite all of that, I would still argue that it is not easy to construct any kind of blueprint for youth policy nor any roadmap to a particular policy destination. The shaping of youth policy, and its subsequent delivery and effective implementation, is a fickle and unpredictable process, subject to the vagaries of political change and professional commitment, and indeed receipt and interpretation by the young people at whom it may be directed. As Karen Evans has suggested, youth policy has to be considered at (at least) three points: when it is *espoused* by politicians, when it is *enacted* by civil servants and youth professionals, and when it is *experienced* by young people. That is a very important message.

Having said all of that, my own interest in policy developed during the 1980s as I witnessed the *damaging* effects of intentional youth policy across a range of policy domains: schooling, housing, justice and employment. Youth policy is not always benign nor positive in its effects, even when it is purposefully constructed. It was during those years in the 1980s – as a practitioner and a researcher, and with a toe in the water of 'youth policy' (I sat on a national advisory committee on youth research, had advised the government on youth unemployment programmes, and was chairing two national committees, on HIV/drug prevention, and on

youth work) – that I realised two things: first, that interventions were increasingly required in young people’s lives, and secondly, that they needed to be enabling and supportive.

This is what Mark Drakeford (now the First Minister of the Welsh Government, then an academic colleague) and I argued in 1998. The non-intervention proponents (such as Edwin Schur in the 1960s), on the grounds that labelling worsened outcomes for young people, may well once have peddled an agenda of *benign neglect* on the grounds that most deviant and disadvantaged youth usually found their way ‘back in’, but now this was tantamount to *malign indifference*: to ‘leave the kids alone’ was likely to consign young people to marginalisation and social exclusion over far longer periods of their lives. This argument is, indeed, what later became known as the ‘scarring effects’ arising from early experiences of being ‘NEET’ (not in education, employment or training), if nothing was done about it. Connections, where possible, needed to be maintained or re-established as fast as possible. Disengaged young people needed to be ‘re-engaged’ at the earliest opportunity.