

Chapter 1

“Sniffin’ glue” – Scanning some horizons for youth policy in 2020

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INTRODUCTION

When The Sex Pistols emerged in 1976/77 at a time of social unrest and emergent austerity, a young punk called Mark P established the leading punk fanzine of its day – Sniffin’ Glue – with articles and cartoons depicting the angst of the young.

Some 30 years ago I wrote a short article based on my experiences as a practising youth worker, during which I was witnessing the struggles facing more and more young people in making what came to be known as “transitions to adulthood”. These changing and increasingly complex transitions are now well rehearsed in academic literature where the multiple transitions (from school to work, families of origin to families of destination, dependent housing to independent living and more) and their associated challenges have been repeatedly documented, with – though there are some exceptions (Leccardi and Ruspini 2006, Helve and Evans 2013) – incessant and uniform repetition. My practice piece, entitled “Struggling Beyond Youth” (Williamson 1985), suggested speculatively that public policy for young people remained concerned with the “acute anxieties of adolescence” and was failing to address what I depicted as the “emerging chronic crisis of young adulthood”. That was a generation ago, and the current generation is more seriously afflicted by that crisis in myriad ways that could never have been anticipated. It is the stuff of a great deal of political, journalistic and academic debate – how will the young respond to “The Crisis”, and how should public institutions and political decisions react?

At a recent conference organised by the Youth Partnership between the Council of Europe and the European Commission, exploring a range of issues and the challenges these may present for young people by 2020, one participant suggested that far too few young people in Europe were even being allowed to “sniff” a range of experiences and opportunities that might enhance their personal futures and contribute to more positive futures for their families, communities, regions, nations and Europe itself. On myriad fronts, the “glue” that produces tolerance and understanding, social cohesion, social inclusion and improved life chances needs both to be strengthened and extended.

This paper considers the context in which the conference took place, the reflections and deliberations at the event itself, and the broad themes that represent the essential core for youth policy development in Europe (and indeed beyond) as 2020 approaches.

THE CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

It is impossible to consider the contemporary social condition of young people in Europe without confronting, at its very epicentre, the levels of youth unemployment. The shocks of the “one in five” that have routinely challenged policy making around labour market insertion, vocational training and youth support have been replaced with scenarios where half or even more of young people are excluded from the labour market. There are, of course, some exceptions (Germany and Austria are still doing reasonably well in holding their levels of youth unemployment at under 10%) and Greece and Spain (both well over 50%) are extreme cases, but, as politicians are prone to say, there is no room for complacency. Equally, however, there is also no reason for panic or fear: levels of social unrest – notwithstanding some street protests and the Occupy movement – that might have been reasonably anticipated in such circumstances have not (yet?) materialised. The responses of the young to this particular consequence of austerity have been surprisingly muted and unsurprisingly varied (see Williamson 2013).

European leaders may make a huge issue of the need to develop a “knowledge-based” economy but, from young people’s perspective, engagement with education and learning, and the striving for accreditation and qualifications has not been matched with positions in the labour market commensurate with those achievements. This has often produced despondency and demoralisation in the young, who sense a breach of the “generational contract” that is tantamount to what has been depicted as betrayal: promises made to the younger generation have not been honoured. For this, and other reasons, there is growing evidence of alienation from and mistrust of mainstream politics and of the politicians who peddle it.

Yet there has been relatively little indication that this has been replaced by new, alternative democratic politics or stronger affiliation to the political extremes. People will, of course, point to the tragic events visited on young people in Norway by Anders Behring Breivik and his proclaimed rationale of seeking to defend a Christian Europe from an invasion of Islam and the “infidel”. People will draw attention, in contrast, to terrorist attacks by young Muslims in Spain and England. And others will note the rise in popularity of right-wing political parties in countries as diverse as Finland, Denmark, the Netherlands and Greece. But, though none of this should be dismissed as matters of no concern, there has been no dramatic surge of young people engaged in these ways.

Instead, they are trying to get on with their lives. The knock-on effects of precarious employment opportunities have been illustrated in the areas of family formation and housing stability. Young people are delaying having their own children, are struggling to establish independent living and are generally finding their transitions to autonomy obstructed, protracted and unpredictable. It would be foolish to proclaim, as some youth organisations sometimes tend to do, that all young people

are excluded. This is clearly not so. Some, through good fortune, patronage, family background, social networks, particular achievements and personal determination, are still doing reasonably fine, but many more – a substantial minority now, if not a marginal majority – are facing levels of exclusion that had never been anticipated. This has potential consequences for individuals in terms of despondency and perhaps despair, for societies in relation to deviance and cohesion, and for democracy in terms of commitment and legitimacy. It may be grand rhetoric but that does not devalue the message when it is said “we fail the young at our peril”.

TRANSFORMATIVE LEGACIES NEED TRANSFORMATIVE ACTIONS – THE BIG ISSUES OF OUR TIME

The Budapest conference was not charged with pinning down precise policy objectives. Indeed, that was what it was not permitted to do. Instead, it basked in the luxury of “scanning the horizons”, to detect and discuss trends and challenges reaching beyond the current moment and looking towards and beyond 2020 – a year, we were told, that may seem just hours away for a demographer who looks perhaps one hundred years ahead but feels close enough to herald almost imminent Armageddon for the ecologist.

The youth field has a dreadful tendency to look inwards, navel-gazing in the vernacular, at the expense of hanging its many issues on one of the pegs representing the big issues of our time. Hence the idea that the conference should be opened by a series of “provocations” (or inspirations, depending on one’s point of view) on some of those big issues of our time: demography, ecology, economy, technology, democracy and values. The first evening was spent with participants testing their youth knowledge and experience against the frameworks of those contributions.

An official report has been produced on the conference (Kristiansen 2013), and this details the process and discussion of the event. Here some selected extracts (in italics) will be presented, together with supplementary material recorded by the author.

One of the key messages from the provocation on demography was that even if Europe draws on all its existing human resources in response to its multiple needs, massive immigration from outside of Europe will be needed to maintain stability and ensure growth. With an ageing population, the prolongation of youth, the retirement age and its related pensions challenge, “much more bold thinking is needed” requiring concomitant political drive and determination. And although a much more immediate time frame was considered in the provocation on ecology, a very similar conclusion was reached. While, for the longer term (if there is one), environmental conscientiousness and accountability need to be embedded as an integral part of the education of young people, it was also asserted that sustainable development “requires a major shift in the way we think”. On a rather different tack and track, the provocation on economy focused on the unprecedented levels of youth unemployment in Europe and especially the plight of the 14 million young people who are described as NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training), which is associated with high social and economic costs. Indeed, the speaker emphasised the need to “avoid sowing the seeds of disengagement and disillusionment”. Education, of course, is often considered to be the measure that can both

prevent disengagement and promote re-engagement but the prospective role of new information and communication technologies in learning and development is contested and controversial. According to the provocation on technology, there are many grounds for optimism:

It facilitates personalised learning; it enables learners to learn anywhere and anytime; it allows immediate feedback and formative assessment; it makes it possible to reach a wider community of learners; it provides opportunities for seamless learning across a range of devices; it encourages collaborative and project-based learning; it expands the reach and equity of education; it favours situated learning; it minimises educational disruption in conflict and disaster areas; it assists with the integration of learners with disabilities; and it can improve the administration as well as the cost-effectiveness of education and training.

The list of positive possibilities is seemingly endless. Yet however dramatic the paradigm shift in learning that may arise from technological innovation, the fact remains that “education is a social process” requiring human interaction and facilitation.

The provocation on democracy (reported in full in this journal – see the article by Muxel) suggested that young people’s reaction to politicians and policy is composed of mistrust, disgust and boredom as the main ingredients, but that they still express political commitment through social media and place value on such issues as pragmatism, efficiency and individualisation. It was noted that “abstention from voting could be a sign of political vitality”. Past transformations in the political landscape have to be matched by further transformations today and tomorrow, through constructive and not just reactive dialogue between young people and government.

A final, rather more philosophical, provocation on values noted the place of children as natural and active philosophers but that “forming and sustaining values is a mixed business”. Perhaps they should be consistently held, but values are contingent on environment and context and “acting according to your values is not always easy”; moreover:

... we should be aware of the different values that may underlie concepts that we use when trying to interact with people from other backgrounds than ourselves – we therefore cannot take consensus for granted, even though we use the same words.

As an archetypical case in point, the concept of “Europe” carries very different value connotations.

SOME KEY CHALLENGES IN YOUTH POLICY DOMAINS

These six provocations were carried forward, after specific interrogation by participants, into a full day’s discussion within ten thematic working groups, reflecting key issues within the youth field: learning, work, health, inclusion, citizenship and participation, identity and lifestyles, diversity and solidarity, mobility, housing and family, and crime and justice. The four slots in the day were given over to different emphases, beginning with a review of existing knowledge, followed by perspectives from different countries, then the presentation of interesting and instructive case

studies, and finally the identification of key challenges. The latter are reported below, and inevitably, there is some predictable duplication!

With regard to learning, it was felt that more attention needed to be given to demographic change, democratic issues and citizenship, and globalisation and the information society. In relation to work, there needed to be closer links with (both formal and non-formal) learning, more calibrated responses to youth unemployment, and more acknowledgement of the impact of migration on labour market contexts. For health, a rather disparate trio of ideas emerged: the standard question of access to health services was supplemented by questions concerning the changing nature of youth lifestyles and the as yet unknown health implications of protracted and intensive use of social media.

A predictable concern about effective reach emerged in the discussion on inclusion, coupled with the need to ensure appropriate differentiation between different sub-groups of excluded young people. However, a focus on individual pathologies had to be set firmly against some of the structural and socio-political dimensions of youth social exclusion. Possibilities for citizenship and participation hinged, it was argued, on strategies for empowerment, the securing of equal rights for young people and the promotion of new forms of dialogue between government and young people.

On the topic of identity and lifestyles, there was a need to consider youth culture and lifestyles as potentially political statements by young people who have rejected the ballot box. It was also important to be aware that it may be inappropriate to respect and celebrate all forms of diverse lifestyles: some may be anti-democratic and oppressive to others. And from more of a research perspective, more needed to be understood about how young people construct the multiple identities that prevail in the modern world. The broad issue of diversity and solidarity – manifested across cultures, generations and ethnic groups throughout Europe – elicited a call for deeper dialogue and mutual learning, beyond existing practices, and strengthening the contribution to be made through non-formal learning. Furthermore, despite rhetorical commitment to this issue, there was a need for more strategic commitment and concerted, rather than feeble and fragmented, action. Mobility is an equally amorphous concept, demanding clarification. As with health, there is also a question of access, and the need for flexible support, if young people are to take full advantage of its benefits.

Finally, again, one-size-fits-all dialogue and response does not fit with the diversity of challenges facing young people in housing and family life. Furthermore, the voice of young people is rarely engaged in the policy debate, nor are intergenerational issues and possibilities given sufficient attention. And, in relation to crime and justice, the logic of prevention is incontestable, but any responses need stronger collaboration and integration. Moreover, greater understanding is required of new forms of crime and deviance, especially that related to the Internet and new social media.

It was this range of issues that provided the basis for some final reflection, scrutiny and comment, during a panel discussion and a variety of concluding remarks. As the general rapporteur remarked, “desperate times need desperate measures”: did we need more of the same, or new pathways for development?

GETTING TO THE HEART OF THE FUTURE FOR YOUTH IN EUROPE

The bringing together of people with experience and expertise in disparate parts of the youth field, to engage in an almost academic seminar-style debate – with nothing proscribed and everything permissible – produced a rich vein of thought and understanding. Inevitably, a number of common themes and transversal issues emerged.

Both concrete and more conceptual ideas were tabled, some firmly anchored in one of the corners of the “magic triangle” (of research, policy and practice), others spanning two or all of them. Youth unemployment was a pervasive concern, not just for its production of economic marginality but as a result of its connection with the alienation and disenchantment it engenders, and the prospective effects of these on a healthy democratic society. There was also a plea for intergenerational and intercultural solidarity, building more connections, stronger communication and better understanding between people both horizontally and vertically.

There was a strong view that greater understanding and better conceptual clarity of some of the recurring ideas in the youth field was an essential platform for moving forward. In fast-changing times of new social media, its impact on young people, the way it is used by young people, and its potential for supporting the lives of young people are all key questions that should prevail in youth research. Without such a knowledge base, future initiatives can only be built on shifting sand. Finally, the multiple characteristics of youth experiences, conditions and needs demands more inter-organisational co-operation and knowledge sharing. This can never be unconditional – ethical and professional issues would preclude that – but it needs to be the *prima facie* starting point if relevant and meaningful responses to youth needs are to be established, and if young people’s needs are to be suitably and sensibly represented in the spectrum of wider policy debates.

More abstractly, the seminar generated and reinforced some key messages: the need for differentiation within apparently general categories of young people and their presenting issues; the imperative to promote a voice, especially from the voiceless; the challenge of cultivating political will and championship; the importance of spaces for interaction, exchange and dialogue; and the question of access to opportunities and experiences open, theoretically at least, to young people.

CONCLUSIONS

As one of the provocateurs said quite explicitly, and another implied quite forcefully, “transformative legacies need transformative actions”. The legacy of the financial crash and subsequent austerity in Europe has transformed the context of the lives of its young people. There may be more constrained life chances for a greater minority (and, in some places, a majority), but that does not mean that possibilities have completely evaporated. It does mean, however, that they may be harder to find and that, where they are to be found, young people maximise their engagement with them.

As the conference drew to a close, I thought of three specific things. The first, strangely (because I write just three days after the death of Nelson Mandela), is something I first became aware of when I worked with the National Youth Commission in South Africa not long after the inauguration of the democratic government. Its youth challenges at that time were similar to those that tend to exist elsewhere: education and employment, health, housing and crime. The political will to address these things was not in doubt. But the economic resources to address the scale of the challenge were miniscule. Finding the balance between these three things is always going to present dilemmas.

The second was the concept, derived from those heady days of punk rock and its flagship fanzine, *Sniffin' Glue*. I noted next to the word "sniffin'": experiences, opportunities, conditions, circumstances, spaces, interaction, association. I noted next to the word "glue": cohesion, connection, solidarity, dialogue, understanding. There is probably quite a lot of overlap between the two. And it is, of course, critically important to bridge the two. Many more young people need to sniff (to have awareness, access and some action) the possibilities open to them, in order to illuminate the pathways of their lives. This, in turn, is likely to contribute to solidarity and social cohesion in Europe, through broader and deeper experiences and opportunities.

The final thought was of a poster on the wall in a remote cottage in the Welsh mountains. It is the first thing you see when you walk in. The cottage is a youth project I have run since 1979. The poster reads: "A ship in the harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are built for". In my head, I quickly made the necessary adaptations to accommodate the Youth Partnership between the European Commission and the Council of Europe – the convenor of the conference. Its work, since the inaugural partnership in 1998 on quality and curriculum development in the field of youth worker training at the European level, has extended to research, history, practice, policy and advocacy. The Youth Partnership is, therefore, a vehicle for promoting, cajoling, persuading and piloting (often innovative) frameworks for thinking and models of practice to these ends: "a (partner)ship in the harbour is safe, but that is not what the (partner)ship was built for"...

The partnership needs to sail into choppy waters if the youth agenda is to be understood and developed by wider policies and practices in education and employment, health and well-being, living conditions (families and housing), creativity and initiative, and crime and justice. The glue that connects this diverse territory is clearly the professional and political experience in the youth field but that alone is not enough and will remain quite inadequate unless more robust and committed action can be nurtured throughout the youth policy domains that affect the lives of the young. Without broader and deeper engagement in this way, young people will become more and more disconnected from, and unable to recreate, structures and measures that have hitherto sustained the European project.

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