

**For God's sake,
tie your ropes
together:
the (recent)
history of youth
work in Wales –
Political betrayal,
professional
infighting and
practice inertia**

Howard Williamson

→ Preface

The title of this paper derives from Tony Jeffs' final remarks in his scene-setting address to the second Blankenberge workshop. He told the story of a child who fell down a well. The child cried for help. Adults rapidly arrived and one threw a rope down the well. It was not long enough, the child shouted. Another rope was thrown down, but the child still could not reach it, and a third was lowered. It was still not long enough. With three ropes dangling above the child's head, the call came from below: "For God's sake, tie your ropes together". It is an apt metaphor for youth policy in many countries where there is a lack of inter-sectorial cohesion and too many independent initiatives that fail to join together. The recent history of youth work in Wales, despite a promising start following "devolution" in 1999, and after significant confusion about its direction during the 1990s (see Williamson, 1995) provides some strands of one such rope; a more overarching analysis of the various "ropes" of youth policy in Wales can be found in Williamson (2007).

→ Introduction

This is a partial and rather personal account of the evolution of youth work in Wales over the past 20 years for, in policy terms, I have been integrally linked to the developments I describe. Appointed as the chair of the Wales Youth Work Partnership in 1989, I was, until 2006 and perhaps beyond, a significant “actor” in the changes that took place. The true historian of youth work in Wales is John Rose, whose Ph.D thesis addressed the topic (Rose, 2006) and whose writing with Bert Jones was a key feature of the publications that emerged from the biennial Durham history conferences (Jones and Rose, 2003; Rose and Jones, 2006). That writing identifies many distinctive threads in Welsh youth work history, despite it being theoretically umbilically attached to England until as recently as 1999, when policy responsibility for youth work was devolved to the newly-established National Assembly for Wales and its Welsh Assembly Government.

At the second Blankenberge workshop, I stood in as a replacement for a contributor from another country who was unable to attend. Thus my preparation was spontaneous and I had not expected to have to prepare it for publication. That I decided to do so was not just because I believe the story from Wales is both important and instructive, but also because I had detected an absence of the “personal” in the preceding accounts presented at both the first and second Blankenberge workshops. Yet I knew that, certainly in some cases, those reporting on their country’s histories had also played a key part in shaping their more recent histories as well as constructing the historical record altogether. The following account of Wales unashamedly injects the personal into both the professional and the political. Youth work histories are not just about structures and strategy. The twists and turns of youth work (and wider youth policy) development and implementation are often influenced, sometimes very significantly, by individuals within that so-called “magic triangle” of youth research, policy and practice. And it is not always virtuous circles of development that they produce. Indeed, some might say that there were moments when unfortunate personality clashes (maybe sometimes involving me) arguably obstructed and stalled positive development and delayed the progress that otherwise might have materialised.

This is an account of recent youth (support)¹ work in a small country – Wales. Despite my close involvement in that history, which some might allege is bound to produce bias and weight in particular directions, I hope my academic principles and personal integrity vitiate the worst excesses of any grievances I may hold, and there are, without doubt, some – where there is little doubt, I believe, amongst both my allies and opponents, is that I have always had the life-chances, opportunities and positive experiences of young people in Wales closest to my heart. And effective youth work, however that may be defined, is a key element of that aspiration.

→ Prehistory

For many years, youth work in “England and Wales” was largely synonymous. Though there may have been “small departures” in terms of detail and in terms of some distinctively Welsh youth organisations (notably the Urdd Gobaith Cymru,

1. The mutation of the Youth Service (encapsulating municipal and voluntary youth work organisations) into “youth support services” (covering a much broader range of interventions based on different principles, philosophies, methodologies and practice) has been very controversial in the United Kingdom, and especially in Wales.

or the Welsh League of Youth, whose work was constructed to promote and extend the use of the Welsh language but was much more besides – see Davies, 1973), early “national” reports tended to treat Wales as a region of England, much to the chagrin of those who detected important differences not just in language, but also in culture and rurality. Indeed, the famous Albemarle report (Ministry of Education, 1960) addressed the Youth Service in England and Wales.

Such reports on the Youth Service were published roughly every 10 years. The one that appeared in the 1980s, the Thompson report (Department of Education and Science, 1982) was notable because it concerned itself only with England. It was left to Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education, through its inspector in Wales with a dedicated responsibility for the Youth Service, to produce a separate report for Wales (HMI, 1983). That was, arguably, a precipitating moment that led to a growing divergence in youth work policy and practice between Wales and England.

→ Points of departure

The year 1985 was International Youth Year with its three themes of participation, peace and development. It heralded a number of “separatist” initiatives in Wales. A Wales Youth Forum (WYF) was established. A distinctly Welsh youth information booklet, *Canllaw online* (a name resurrected later, with ultimately rather destructive consequences), was produced. Perhaps most significantly, given disquiet in some parts of youth work in Wales that the Leicester (England) based National Youth Bureau (NYB) was not according enough attention to the specificities of Wales, an outpost or offshoot of NYB was established in Wales: the Wales Youth Work Partnership (WYWP). This brought together the different contributors to the “Youth Service” in Wales, the local authorities (municipalities), the voluntary sector, the professional association for youth workers in Wales, and the Wales Youth Forum. Initially, this concerned itself with largely professional matters of delivery and quality but, by the end of the 1980s, it had to turn its attention to more “political” questions.

Instead of yet another ten-yearly report on the Youth Service, the UK government in London decided to hold a series of ministerial conferences on the Youth Service, designed to focus its practice on current political priorities relating to young people (training, crime, health) and to strengthen its relationships with other youth policy structures (schooling, the careers service, policing). The political demand was to establish a “curriculum” for youth work that would reflect a “concentrated fusillade” of distinctive practice rather than a “scatter gun approach”. The National Youth Bureau was charged with taking this imposed agenda forward (see NYB, 1990).

By the time of the second ministerial conference (Birmingham, December 1990), those attending from Wales struggled to see the relevance of much of the debate. The challenges facing young people and youth work in urban, multicultural England were rather different from those in rural, still relatively homogenous Wales. On their return to Wales, those delegates pressed the WYWP to strengthen its “independence” through the production of a different youth work “curriculum statement” and the establishment of a separate “youth agency” for Wales. The battle lines were drawn symbolically by repeated references at WYWP meetings to the English Youth Bureau (and later the “English” Youth Agency) to the chagrin of observers from NYB/NYA. I told them that we could also correct the “error” but they would have to be ready to catch a later train home because every time “national” was mentioned, someone would inevitably raise the question as to which “nation” was being referred to.

The rather radical, perhaps stupid (in the sense of being impossible to achieve), English youth work curriculum statement that spoke to redressing all forms of inequality was not mirrored in Wales. Instead, the youth work curriculum statement for Wales retained three broad principles – that youth work was participative, empowering and educative – and added a fourth: that it was also expressive. This statement remains the philosophical framework for youth work in Wales to this day, though some details have been amended from the original (and some might question how true some youth work practice remains to these foundations). At a structural level, the mutation of the National Youth Bureau to the National Youth Agency in England (in 1991) provided the opportunity for Wales to create its own youth agency. The Wales Youth Agency was established a year later, in 1992, following considerable inertia and in-fighting between what came to be its constituent parts, which, though keen to separate from England, were anxious about their individual loss of autonomy and independence. The umbrella body for the voluntary sector in Wales, the Council for Wales Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS), was particularly concerned on this front.

→ The Wales Youth (Work) Agency

The Wales Youth Agency (WYA) was the successor to the Wales Youth Work Partnership, but it had more formal managerial authority over the former “partnership”. Though welcomed from the start for its symbolic status (a separate youth agency for Wales) it was also criticised from the start for apparently seeking to “take over” youth work in Wales through absorbing the functions of formerly independent CWVYS and the WYF.

Initially, the WYA was funded to fulfil five distinct functions: youth participation and empowerment (the WYF role), information for youth workers, youth information, training and staff development (significantly through an education and training standards role), and support for the voluntary youth work sector and its voluntary youth work organisations (the CWVYS role). The WYF folded at this point, but CWVYS continued as an entity, though with no public financial support.

The WYA added a further function through dialogue with the British Council and its Youth Exchange Centre: international work. Sometime later, it had another function imposed on it: the management of grants to voluntary youth organisations. All this created tensions at many levels. There were endless debates about whether or not the agency was essentially concerned with “youth work” or with “work with young people”. There were articulated concerns about it both supporting the voluntary sector and overseeing the grants to its organisations. There was criticism of the fact that “youth voice” was now harnessed to a (Welsh) government-funded agency. In short, most disputes hinged on the extent to which the agency was perceived to have the capacity to operate autonomously rather than having to respond to the whims and demands of what was then the Welsh Office. Nevertheless, after what seemed to be interminable attention to the responsibilities of its formal status (a non-departmental public body or NDPB), the agency started to interface with the field and, throughout the 1990s, commanded considerable credibility through its defence and advocacy for youth work.

→ Some key moments in the 1990s

Perhaps one of the very first independent actions by Wales at an international level (on any front, not just in the youth field) was the signing of the Lisbon Protocol in 1992. This was concerned with the under-26 youth card and, along with Young

Scot, Wales led the way in the United Kingdom in progressive thinking and practice on youth information. A year later, Wales hosted a European conference of the Council of Europe's Congress for Local and Regional Authorities in Europe that produced the Llangollen Declaration on youth participation. The agency hosted another European conference concerned with the social exclusion/inclusion of young people in Cardiff in 1994. Prior to that, it established the Youth Work Excellence Awards, with some modest private funding from a national bank. These were highly contentious at the start; there was a reluctance to "judge" youth work for good or for bad. However, over time and through its annual application, judging and presentation process, the excellence awards helped to showcase diversity and innovation in youth work and thereby strengthen political support. The awards provided a record of strong club-based youth work, the range of issues tackled, residential experiences, international exchanges, young people's engagement with their local communities and more besides.

Youth work, nevertheless, remained a vulnerable dimension of youth policy during the mid-1990s. At one point, the political decision was made to withdraw the government funding of voluntary youth organisations in Wales (the NVYO grant scheme). The Wales Youth Agency fought a rearguard action, making representations to the minister and hosting a national conference called "Building the future", with an accompanying document of the same name (WAY, 1995). According to later remarks made by ministers, this helped to save some central planks of youth work in Wales. Moreover, the agency co-ordinated Welsh representation for the United Kingdom Youth Work Alliance that battled, through its publication of *Agenda for a generation* (United Kingdom Youth Work Alliance, 1996), to preserve a threatened service across the four nations of the United Kingdom. Subsequently the alliance also produced *Learning, citizenship and competence* (United Kingdom Youth Work Alliance, 1999), a pamphlet to persuade Blair's new Labour Government of the benefits of youth work, but this did not cut much ice with the Westminster government.

In Wales, however, the new Labour administration displayed considerably more faith in the value of youth work, even prior to formal devolution. It charged the Wales Youth Agency with exploring ways in which youth work practice might support the retention of young people in learning (and reduce school exclusions). It responded positively to the agency's work in aligning youth work with youth crime prevention initiatives. And the agency even employed a development officer dedicated to supporting youth work's contribution to health promotion. All this was, of course, "tightrope" stuff, in which the Agency sought to reconcile wider political agendas and priorities with the principles and practice of youth work. Some viewed this as progressive, others as capitulation and the compromising of cherished youth work values. The irony was that those from within the youth work field who alleged that the Agency was "selling out" were matched by those beyond the field who saw the Agency engaging in the stubborn defence of what they viewed as old-fashioned and out-of-date youth work practice. The internal frictions did not bode well for any future when the Agency might be under threat.

Not that this was the case at the turn of the millennium. The agency's budget had grown six-fold. More grounded youth work practice had benefited from additional funding both from the state and from the National Lottery. The Secretary of State for Wales had a youth work background. The agency was positively sandwiched between a re-energised field and a supportive political infrastructure. It was trusted with strategy, professional development and practice innovation. With the inauguration of the new Welsh Assembly Government, the agency's (and thus youth

work's) position was strengthened yet further. Three individuals with youth work backgrounds contributed to the expert group that shaped the "flagship" youth policy document in Wales, "Extending Entitlement" (National Assembly for Wales, 2000). Youth workers in England, who were having to contend with their minister's remark that the Youth Service was the "can't do, won't do" service, looked enviously across the border, especially when Extending Entitlement received unanimous political support (59-0) when it was presented to the assembly.

Whereas the Youth Service in England was being threatened by the development of a new "youth support" service called Connexions with its own new profession of "personal advisers", the new Welsh document, subtitled "supporting young people in Wales", explicitly acknowledged the importance (indeed centrality) of youth work and proclaimed that there was no need for either new structures or a new profession. The policy commitment was also to a broader age range, 13-25, rather than the 13-19 age group to be served in England by both youth work and Connexions. In the debate within the Welsh Assembly, the minister announced an extra 3 million pounds (over three years) to support youth work in Wales: to strengthen partnerships between the maintained and the voluntary sector, to improve youth information provision, and to extend the range and quality of training for youth workers. This work was to be undertaken by the Wales Youth Agency, and it would be resourced accordingly. Even the heightened commitment to youth participation would be led by the Agency, on the grounds of its experience of engaging with young people, and its policy officer convened *Llais Ifanc* (Young Voice) which eventually became Funky Dragon, the Children and Young People's Assembly for Wales. A strongly funded agency would be leading a diversity of established and innovative youth work development, designed to improve opportunities and experiences for young people in line with the vision of Extending Entitlement, and contribute especially to particular strands of that vision, notably around youth information, away from home and international experiences, and youth participation.

→ Fragmentation and division

Or so the Wales Youth Agency thought. At the very point when youth work in Wales was convinced that it was more celebrated, coherent and connected than it had ever been, its position began to unravel. New faces and new structures began to appear – in government, in the civil service, across the wider sector of children and youth organisations, and in the youth work field itself. At governmental level, though the minister for education (and thus youth work) remained the same, a new first minister took over, whose loyalties to youth work and the Youth Service were less apparent and who was clearly more focused on an agenda for children. Within the Welsh Assembly Government (the national administration) a new youth policy unit was established, thereby stripping the Wales Youth Agency of its implicit and previously assumed strategic role in the development of youth work. There were clearly different views about what constituted "youth work" held by officials within the Government of Wales. Indeed, through some unclear messages from professionals in the field and through misinterpretation by officials, the idea of a new profession of personal learning and development coaches (later shortened to "learning coaches") materialised and fitted well with new conceptions of youth support services and not a distinctive Youth Service. But a new profession? The thought had been firmly rebutted and rejected only a couple of years before, when the mantra was concerned with strengthening and joining up existing professions, especially youth work, the careers service and schools.

Both within the Youth Service itself and across the wider sector of children's and young people's services, new bodies, structures, organisations and partnerships sprang up – presenting veritable Trojan horses to the lead role and solidity of the Wales Youth Agency. A standing conference for youth work in Wales was formed, initially and ostensibly to “defend” youth work against the paths being taken by the Welsh Assembly Government, but soon stepping clearly into the terrain hitherto occupied by the Welsh Youth Agency. Some of its membership proclaimed mutuality, as they were bound to do, given that they were part of both systems. Further away, a body describing itself as representing All Wales Young People's Organisations sprang up, as did a Participation Consortium led by Save the Children in Wales. Most significantly, the Welsh Assembly Government announced the formation, at municipal level, of Children and Young People's Partnerships, within which there would be Young People's Partnerships as a voluntary addition. This development derived from a new Welsh children's strategy (Welsh Assembly Government 2004), to which Extending Entitlement was increasingly playing second fiddle. The bodies referred to above were closely involved in the process, the Wales Youth Agency less so.² But no new structures? Once more, there had been a striking *volte face*.

These developments may have appeared to be, at least at first, relatively innocuous external threats to the Wales Youth Agency and its place at the heart of youth work policy and practice in Wales. Of more concern, almost from the very start of it apparently reaching its zenith of professional and political support, were twin initiatives that prefaced its fragmentation and demise. The first was a resurrected “Canllaw online”, very different from its 1985 manifestation, but formed to endeavour to secure National Lottery funding for the establishment of a pioneering and comprehensive youth information system. It had been formed as a charity in order to be eligible for lottery money and had sometimes presented and described itself as an “offshoot” of the Wales Youth Agency, even asking WYA's director to join the board of the charity. Though it was never its offshoot, the agency had certainly been supportive of the new “Canllaw online”; as a company, the agency had always also intended to seek charitable status in order to access charitable monies, but it had never got round to doing so. It was supportive of Canllaw's mission, until it became aware that by the back door Canllaw was trying to get its hands on the agency's youth information budget. As a result of personal frictions, personal representations and organisational manoeuvring, it eventually succeeded in doing so. That led to the second haemorrhaging of the agency, when the CWVYS, with a work programme but not a staff employee since 1992, spotted the opportunity to seek, once again, its dedicated director. It was also successful in achieving this. As a result, the Welsh Youth Agency lost two thirds of its “new” money, two of its senior staff, as well as some proportion of its older budget. Youth work in Wales was now dispersed, strategically and operationally, across a number of organisations and contexts.

The agency's work diminished yet further when its work with municipal youth forums was criticised by the Welsh Assembly Government and transferred completely to the Participation Unit convened by Save the Children. The Welsh Assembly grant for youth information services, which, though now within “Canllaw

2. There are mixed views about why this was the case. The prevailing official view was that the agency was not willing to “play ball” and was too fixated on the defence of “traditional” youth work; a counter view from the youth work field was that the agency was being deliberately marginalised in order to diminish its role and purpose and ultimately produce its demise: which is eventually what took place.

online”, was at least being managed by the specialist who had previously worked for the agency, and was re-allocated to the Careers Service – thus losing the youth work philosophy that had previously underpinned it. (It was later transferred again to a newly-formed third sector media organisation specialising in work with young people.) The Welsh Assembly Government pressed on with its commitment to youth support services and more targeted programmes concerned with youth crime prevention and healthy lifestyles. The residual allocation from the launch of Extending Entitlement to improve youth worker training was given little encouragement by officials, and staff of the Agency pursued this mission (which in the 1990s had been lauded for its coherence and development) in something of a vacuum. There may have been training for youth work at the local level, in four higher education institutions and through a virtual Staff College co-located with the Agency, but it was increasingly unclear what its graduates were emerging into the field to practice.

→ 2005-09: a rudderless four years

At the end of November 2004 the education minister announced her intention to withdraw public funds from the Wales Youth Agency and to take its remaining functions (training, and education and training standards, youth worker information, international work, and the voluntary youth organisation grant scheme) inside the Welsh Assembly Government. She would have a three month consultation on the proposal and make a formal decision at the end of February 2005. Despite almost unanimous opposition to the idea from the youth work field (which may not always have been comfortable with the agency but were deeply concerned about the implications of its functions being managed within the Welsh Assembly Government), the minister confirmed her intention. Attention was drawn to her officials that both the education and training standards function and the international youth work undertaken through the Agency were not within the minister’s power to control, but words of warning were largely ignored. At the end of December 2005, some 14 dedicated youth work staff of the Agency were transferred into the Welsh Assembly Government into a new “youth work strategy” unit, which steadily reduced to fewer than five people. [By 2010, not one of those transferred will still be working within this unit.] The youth work Education and Training Standards Committee functioned illegally for some months and its precise legal status was still to be clarified even towards the end of 2009. The Agency officer responsible for international work transferred to the British Council in Wales, for she could not carry out this work, for both legal and political reasons, within the Welsh Assembly Government. Some of the “top-up” monies that had been freed for this purpose within the overall budget of the Agency was lost. There was a general climate of inertia. Amongst senior and experienced youth work managers and practitioners in Wales, there was deep disquiet and concern at the strategy and tactics employed by officials within the Welsh Assembly Government to sideline and undermine established youth work practice.

After a long hiatus, despite real efforts on many sides to make the transition of functions from the Agency to the Welsh Assembly Government as short and shallow as possible, a new Youth Service Strategy was launched in the spring of 2007. It was strong on the rhetoric that youth work remained an important contribution to the overall visions for youth policy in Wales. The Wales Youth Agency received one cursory mention, as if it had been written out of history. By 2009, Extending Entitlement was also being airbrushed into history through the production of a new framework for children and young people called *Cymry Ifanc* (Young Wales), though the new director-general – a man who commands considerable respect and

has a reputation for integrity – remains adamant that its philosophy will still exert a significant influence on the direction of youth policy in Wales.

→ Where now for youth work in Wales?

The 2007 Youth Service Strategy was provided with relatively little resource base for review, development and implementation. However, a budget almost a quarter of the policy allocation has been made available for a robust evaluation, just two and a half years on. There is a strong likelihood that it will conclude that youth work has made only a modest contribution to the big visions that were mapped within the strategy. That may sound a further death knell for a distinctive youth work practice. There was a national conference in February 2009 called “Thinking seriously about youth work” which attracted practitioners and managers from across Wales as well as some distinguished national and international speakers, yet the event was largely preaching to the unconverted who displayed a gritty determination to defend the cherished values of voluntary engagement and dialogical space that has historically guided youth work across its many contexts. The idea of “youth support services” was cursorily dismissed.

But those at that conference sit unequivocally on one side of the fence. On the other side is a new generation of “youth workers”, compelled or persuaded to pick up resources from different funding pots to engage in a diversity of projects with young people that may or may not readily attract the label of “youth work” (see Williamson, 2008). They are pragmatists, largely locally trained or not trained at all, and very different from those who have agonised for lifetimes over philosophical and conceptual debates about the legitimate territory of youth work.

It is, according to some, such agonising that has done so much to undermine the credibility and reputation of youth work. Surely, they say, it is a simple question of getting on with the job of supporting young people. Perhaps. But if the challenge is a different one, of defining the boundaries of youth work practice and the principles that should govern it, then public professional infighting has allowed hostile political and administrative arrangements, that have very little grasp of the complexity of these issues, to divide and rule. The outcome has been a weakened field and enormous uncertainty about the focus and direction of youth work practice.

John Rose, who himself moved into the Welsh Assembly Government as the head of Youth Work Strategy, from his role as assistant chief executive of the Wales Youth Agency, has now retired as a civil servant, though he continues to teach on initial training courses for youth and community workers and, in Wales, has pioneered postgraduate study in this field. At a recent conference, freed from the constraints of his civil service role, he noted – and the audience found this to be arguably the most memorable statement of the day – that “we have to put the lights on all over the house, not just in the front room”. In the first Bert Jones memorial lecture, Rose was reasserting the case and need for a distinctive Youth Service, across both state and voluntary structures, responsible for the delivery of a “youth work” practice grounded in some shared and mutually understood principles and methodologies. Some all-singing, all-dancing repertoire of youth support services, heavily leaning towards servicing wider political agenda and trapped within a range of imposed bureaucratic expectations, was unlikely to serve the personal developmental and non-formal learning needs of young people. Rose observed that even those in Wales who had “joined the real world” of targets, indicators and outcomes, “have still found themselves in the wilderness”, outflanked by other so-called youth services even more eager to embrace and comply with these frameworks. But he then

asserted, with some optimism and not a little irony, that this “real world” will not last forever and that a new “real world” will emerge once more, one that places greater acceptance on the relative independence of the Youth Service, that respects the need for an associative life for young people that is constructed on supporting youth autonomy and self-direction, that can engage flexibly in the provision of a range of activities and experiences, but one that is consistently and consensually anchored in some core values. This was, indeed, the findings of a piece of research conducted by the Wales Youth Agency in the middle of the 1990s (Williamson et al., 1997), and few in direct contact with the heterogeneity of young people in Wales today would dispute the need for this to be one component of a comprehensive approach to youth policy – in Wales and beyond.

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