

Title: The Experience of open access youth work: the voice of young people

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The Experience of Open Access Youth Work:

The voice of young people

Daisy Ritchie & Jon Ord

Abstract

This research explores young people's experiences of open access youth work and identifies what they consider to be its value. The detailed analysis of the data, achieved through focus groups revealed that 'association' was a key driver of engagement. It also highlighted the support system the youth club creates amongst the peers. The young people also valued the relationships they form with youth workers and acknowledge the support and guidance offered to them which better enables them to reflect on and navigate their complex lives. Young people also valued the acceptance they feel from the community within the youth space as comfort and reassurance when at times they do not feel like they fit in anywhere else. This research offers a significant counter to the tide of current targeted youth work policy which is resulting in the demise of a provision which, judging by the findings from this research, appears to be highly valued by, and beneficial to, young people.

This research is a small scale practitioner research which is an: 'enquiry that is directed towards creating and extending knowledge, illuminating and improving practice and influencing policies in an informed way' (Goodfellow, 2005: np). It sets out to obtain an in depth, qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of open access youth work. The principal researcher had been a youth worker in the youth club for some time before undertaking this research. It was conducted in a small voluntary sector open access youth centre in a deprived city centre location, in the South West of England. The centre is open three times a week; twice for open access youth work sessions and once for a young women's group. The research utilises focus groups to elicit the motivations behind young people's attendance and continued engagement with open access youth work, especially when very little material resources are available.

Historical Developments of Open Access Youth Work and Recent Policy Changes

To begin with it is necessary to clarify what is meant by 'open access' youth provision, as there are a number of related terms which are used to discuss youth work, such as 'universal provision' or 'generic' youth work. These terms are largely interchangeable and they are used to describe youth provision that a young person may access regardless of their background, needs or position in society (Robertson, 2005). Open access youth work is based on voluntary participation (Davies, 2005; Jeffs & Smith, 1999), where any young person is free to enter and leave of their own free will. Open access youth work is portrayed as an exchange which 'is volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees' (In Defence of Youth Work, 2008: np). Another key element of open access youth work is the concept of 'association' (Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Robertson, 2005) – the coming together in an informal group. Association in youth work places a special emphasises on the relationships between young people and the generation of a 'club' environment. As Brew (1943; cited in Jeffs & Smith, 1999: 45) explains 'a club is neither a series of individuals...nor is a club a club leader. A club is a community engaged in the task of educating itself'.

Although open access youth work can take place in a detached or street based setting, as well as through other project based work (Robertson, 2005) this specific research is focussed on centre based provision – a youth club. Open access youth work is contrasted with targeted youth work, which is focused on identifying groups of young people, based on particular needs and often with predefined purposes or outcomes; often operating through 1-1 meetings between youth worker and young person.

The origins of open access youth work in the voluntary sector are over 150 years old (Jefferies & Smith, 1999; Davies, 1999). The involvement of both central and local government in the funding youth work also began a century ago, with the provision of grants during the First World War (Davies, 1999). However the origins of the comprehensive network of open access youth centres lies in the Albemarle report in 1960 (Ministry of Education, 1960) which resulted in the construction of over 3,300 centres in England in the following decade. The Albemarle report was also instrumental in the establishment of the local government youth service which was responsible for the delivery of youth work (Davies, 1999). As Davies (1999: 57) points out: 'If the youth service ever had a golden age then the 1960's were certainly it'. Importantly many of these centres have until very recently continued to provide a space for young people and given them a foothold in communities, which has enabled these centres to survive the subsequent ebb and flow of policy (Ord, 2011).

In the 50 years since Albemarle open access youth work has, to a large extent, been the modus operandi of youth work. However, in recent years youth work has witnessed a significant shift towards targeted - one to one - youth provision (e.g. McCardle, 2014) as well as experiencing the closure of many open access youth centres (McCardle, 2013). Davies & Merton (2009:10) describe this as a shift away from:

Engagement which is voluntary and which allows considerable (though of course not total) discretion about what facilities they [the young people] might use and which programmes they might wish to join once they have decided to engage.

This shift has not occurred overnight, for example in the 1970s Davies (1979) had noted an increasing requirement from policy makers to specify outcomes from young people's engagement in youth work. The early years of the Thatcher government also saw an attempt to impose upon youth work a curriculum predicated on outcomes (NYB, 1990; NYB, 1991; NYA, 1992; Ord, 2007). Youth work, and in particular its outcomes, continued to be brought to account under New Labour, with its alignment to the connexions strategy and a focus on NEETs (Smith, 2002; Ord 2007). However open access youth work retained its foothold, as evidenced by New Labour's influential 'Transforming Youth Work' policy (DfES, 2002) which committed local authorities to providing 'a safe, warm, well equipped meeting place within reasonable distance of home, accessible to young people at times which suits them' (DfES, 2002: 22).

The subsequent policies of Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) and Youth Matters (DfES, 2005; DfES, 2006) placed a significant emphasis on the targeting of resources to those identified as most in need. They also created a new environment of integrated working, placing a duty on all services to 'work more closely together to safeguard, support and develop children and young people' (Davies & Merton, 2009: 10). For many this created a cultural shift too far and the ethos of joined up working and information sharing jarred with youth work's values of confidentiality. De St Croix (2010) arguing that the increased 'surveillance' of young people undermined the relationship of trust between youth worker and young person. Smith maintained that the main problem was: 'There is a constant danger of formalizing activity, failing to cultivate associational life' Smith (2005: np).

Politicians continued to question the viability of open access youth provision, emphasising research undertaken by Fernstein (2005) which surveyed young people who belonged to youth clubs, church institutes, school clubs, sports clubs or stayed at home and then mapped them against their future outcomes in adult life. It specifically attacked youth centres, proposing the following links: 'at age 16 youth club attendance still showed up as a powerful predictor of being an offender' (Fernstein, 2005: 15) and 'being a single parent was clearly predicted by youth club attendance at 16' (Fernstein, 2005: 14). Despite a questionable methodology which conflates causality and correlation and the fact that Feinstein ignored wider

geographic and socio-economics factors, his research was highlighted by politicians (Hodge, 2005). Davies noted (2005: 5): 'Even within a generally affirming ministerial policy statement on youth work, 'evidence' which purports to show youth club attendance as a potentially negative influence is preferred over very recent and substantial findings by direct studies of youth work'. Despite Fernstein later retracting elements of the research and his stance on it; the data was already in circulation and continued to influence policy making.

Despite this gradual shift away from open access provision the final New Labour youth work policy (DfCSF, 2007) was the first since Albemarle to provide funding for the construction of new youth centres. Initially proposing to build a new centre in each constituency, the resulting Myplace programme saw a total investment of £240m over five years in the building of 63 state of the art youth centres in England (DCSF, 2007; Big Lottery, 2009). Despite this considerable investment in new open access youth work centres, the current 'austerity' policy climate has precipitated a further significant shift away from open access provision. Despite positive rhetoric echoed in the title of the most recent policy by the Coalition Government: 'Positive for Youth' (DfE, 2011) and although making reference to youth workers 'skills' as transferrable qualities; stating that: 'youth workers have an important part to play' (DfE, 2011:6). There is however a striking lack of commitment to open access youth work and the Education Funding Agency (2014: np) clearly states: 'There are currently no plans for investment (capital or revenue) by central government in facilities for young people beyond 31 March, 2013'

This shift to targeted and integrated youth work occurred post Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) and was noted by the Education Select Committee. However this has been further exacerbated under both the coalition and conservative governments, resulting in a decrease of around 40% in the availability of open access youth provision around the country (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2011). Severe budget cuts to local authorities have had severe impact with the total expenditure between 2010 and 2012 on services for young people falling by '26 percent from £1,184m to £877m' (DfE, cited in Puffet 2013). Many youth services have been disbanded and others are being forced to merge with other services. For example Staffordshire (McCardle, 2013) and Devon (McCardle, 2014) being the

latest large county youth services to propose scrapping all open access youth provision.

Background Research on Open Access Youth Work

Davies rightly noted as early as 2005 that: 'Youth workers as never before are going to have to be clear, confident and articulate about just what this practice is and how it can make its distinctive contribution' (2005: 7). However open access youth work is an under researched area. The exceptions being: Williamson (1996) Spence (2006), Merton et al (2004) as well as Coburn (2010). Williamson (1996) undertook research which explored the needs of young people aged 15-19. The main theme that emerged was a need for autonomy, where young people wanted to be actively participating in the people decision making process on issues which affected them. The research also found that young people's needs were not met solely through programmes of work, trips and positive activities, but that successful projects fostered engagement and provided supportive environments where participation featured strongly. Williamson (1996: 22) also identified that young people valued somewhere to go, with a safe atmosphere and with people they could trust. This was viewed as a higher priority than the activities and resources on offer. Robertson (2005: 7) suggests Williamson's research documents how youth work meets four identifiable needs for young people:

- Association - somewhere to go
- Activities - something to do
- Advice - someone to talk to
- Autonomy - space of their own

Spence et al (2006: 59) undertook research into young people's experiences of youth work practice and the research highlighted young people's need for association, their need for a place just to 'be', as well as 'things to do and somewhere to go'. She also highlighted the importance of the voluntary relationship, the space in which youth work occurs and the need for youth workers to meet young people where they are at. Both studies were applied practitioner research carried out by academics and practitioners together to explore the significance of open access

youth work for young people, although Spence et al tended to emphasise the voice of practitioners and Williamson's research is 20 years old.

Merton et al's (2004) wide scale evaluation of youth work acknowledged: 'open access work through clubs and centres continues to fulfil important functions in providing a range of opportunities for young people's personal and social development' (Merton et al, 2004: 14). They do however characterise the shift in many local authorities towards targeted work and the pressures on open access youth work. Concluding that: 'youth workers in open access centres and clubs [need to] better demonstrate the value and benefits of what they do' (Merton et al, 2004: 17). The voice or experience of young people however is also limited in their research. Young People's experience was more central in Coburn's (2010) research into what young people learned about 'equality' in open access youth work. This was a valuable ethnographic study which whilst offering valuable insights into the youth work processes which facilitate young people's learning about equality, questions still remain about what young people themselves value about open access youth work.

Although the above research identifies the importance of open access spaces, it is limited, and given the pressure on local government and the difficulties local authorities are having in maintaining these services, this research provides a timely insight into what such provision means for young people. It therefore begins to fill a gap in the literature, articulating the voice of young people communicating the value 'they place' on open access provision.

Methodology

This research adopts an interpretivist epistemology attempting to elicit the meaning the young people make of their experiences rather than simply objectifying their responses (Fox & Martin, 2007). The research was also based in a social constructionist ontological orientation believing that the world is built on social interactions within a shared reality (ibid). This perspective places the young person as the expert in their own lives and thus positions them as central to the research process. The research used qualitative methods of data collection and was inductive

with: 'the aim of understanding experience as nearly as possible as its participants feel it or live it' (Sherman & Webb, 1988: 22).

Research methods

The research took place in a relatively small open access youth club where the primary author had been a youth worker for over a year. The average attendance at the club was approximately 15 - 20 young people, aged between 13 and 19. A series of focus groups were conducted primarily at a separate time to the youth club so as to not interfere with the young people's involvement in their youth club sessions. Over 50% of the regular members of the club took part in at least one of the focus groups. All the participants were deemed able to provide consent as they attend the session of their own volition. Anonymity was assured to the young people who seemed pleased that the practitioner researcher was interested to find out about their experience, the participants were reassured that the club or any of the young people within it would not be identifiable.

The focus groups were carried out with a variety of youth centre participants including regular attendees and those on the periphery, using a snowball sampling methodology. A series of open questions were utilised to encourage a dialogue. The term 'youth club' being used to refer to the open access youth work sessions in order to reflect the language used by the group. The main questions included the following:

- How did you hear about youth club
- How did they describe it to you?
- Have you introduced many other people to youth club and how have you described it to them?
- Why do you come to youth club?
- Can you describe youth club in three words?
- What is good about it and what is not so good about youth club?
- How could it be improved?

Despite the volume of data collected initial themes emerged very quickly from the data, such as the importance of friendship and peer networks as a motivating factor for attending the sessions. The data was rigorously analysed using thematic analysis to: 'provide a rich and detailed, yet complex account of [the] data' (Braun & Clarke

(2006: 5). This followed a 4 stage process which included initial coding, final coding, and pile building Harvey (1990); resulting in the establishment of 2 overarching themes and a number of final codes within them.

Final code	Initial Codes
Association	Association, Community, Family, Belonging
Acceptance	Acceptance, Approval, Identity
Routine	Routine
Motivations	Reasons to come
Peer network	Peer Network, Friends, Interactions
Youth work process	Youth work, Behaviour, Humour, Development
Activities	Activities, Diversion, Positives, Negatives
Relationship	Relationship
Confidence	Confidence
Diverse needs	Needs, Preferences, Positives, Negatives

Table 1: Initial and Final Codes

Findings

On final reflection of the list of codes, it was felt that two individual themes of 'youth work process' and 'association' acted as over-arching themes in part because of their overall importance, but also that the other codes could be seen as subcategories underneath these overarching themes. For example Smith defined association as: 'companionship...solidarity and social affirmation' (Smith, 2001; cited in Robertson 2005: 6), and so it encapsulated aspects of the other categories such as acceptance, peer networks and motivations. Therefore it was decided to distribute the responses from the 'association' theme under the four headings listed below.

Similarly the theme of 'youth work process' acted as an overarching theme which encapsulated the other codes - relationship, activities, confidence and meeting young people's needs. The identification of over-arching themes did not however undermine or simplify the discussion of the findings as can be seen below but they did identify fundamental aspects of young people's experience of open access youth work.

The 2 over-arching themes, with the final codes listed below them, are:

Association:-

- Peer Network
- Acceptance
- Routine
- Motivations

Youth Work Process:-

- Relationships
- Activities
- Confidence
- Diverse needs & challenges

Association

Young people often referred to the importance of their peer-network within the research and this was a regularly occurring theme. Particularly when responding to questions such as how they found out about the youth club, why they attend and what makes it a good place to go to. Initially the centre clearly provides somewhere safe to go and be together, as one young person makes clear: 'if there was no club I'd be in the park or round my mates, we have stuff to do but it's good to come in and have somewhere we can hang out'. Historically youth club provision has been articulated as a safe space for young people to meet, and this has been acknowledged from the Albemarle report (Ministry of Education, 1960) through to the New Labour period (DfES, 2002). Clearly this is important given young people often

feel excluded from community spaces, so they need to have a space of their own provided for them (Robertson, 2005). However in this research the space develops out of and responds to existing peer networks, as well as enabling additional networks to develop as the following young person demonstrates: 'I brought Tom and John up, they er, liked it. Also Mark come up with me and Josh, then he brought his sister up who come with loads of girls'. These social networks within the centre were clearly important to the young people, one pointing out that: 'It makes us feel like a family'. It was apparent in the research that the provision of a space within which young people can development a peer network is vital in enabling young people to come together for support and develop association (Jefferies & Smith, 2005, 2010; Robertson, 2005).

An Example of the 'Pile Building' for Association Code

Code: Association

Kayle: and I've only just starting coming, but Katrina told me it was really good and I had to come.

Katrina: Because I met Kate O and we have similarities...if that makes sense... so it's about meeting people who have the same issues and stuff. You can figure out more about yourselves.

Anna: I think everyone that goes up to youth is like a family, because we all get along but fall out sometimes.

Jo: I used to come up here and hang outside waiting for Josh and Jake, now I come in all the time and it's alright.

Kate: it makes us feel like a family

Anna: yea I can [remember my first time at club] actually, it was really cool, we all made friends, I met Katrina and Sian and it was really cool cos it really helped me with my confidence, to build my confidence.

Another aspect of association was acceptance. Young people frequently commented how they felt accepted in the youth club and how this differed from other areas of their life. For example two young people with hearing problems separately commented that: 'I was really shy [when I started at club] I thought people were

going to take the piss out of me for being deaf. But they don't'. Another young person said: 'Even though I'm deaf, I still get accepted by like, most of the people there'. The embedded value of 'respect' in youth work (NYA, 2001) as well as the importance of what Davies (2015: 100) describes as valuing young people for who they are 'not through the filter of adult imposed labels' are factors underpinning this feeling of acceptance. Such feelings of acceptance are important and evidence a deep level of emotion and connectedness which needs to be acknowledged. For example it is significant when a young person states: 'this is the only place I feel like I fit in and belong'. This aspect often tends to be subsumed superficially within notions of 'somewhere to go'. This even occurred within Williamson's (1996) early research.

Also of importance is what Williamson (1996: 22) describes as providing young people with: 'a place where you're still given a chance'. This was also evidenced in the research where a young person states: 'I used to try and beat everyone up. Then I got banned for two weeks, you gave me a second chance no one's done that for me before'. Another theme allied to association was the idea of 'routine' and this was often alluded to by young people when attending youth club sessions. For example: 'It's just normal, we always come here Tuesday and Friday, it's what we do' and again young person said: 'I sit at home in the holidays waiting for club to be on again! I don't know what to do with myself when it is not on'. However this idea of routine should not be confused with the sense of mundane and routinized habit. The club is evidently an embedded part of the young people's lives and it provides meaning and significance - a place to belong - and therefore is an important part of their routine, and some at least are clearly at loss without it.

Other aspects of the association theme begin to allude to some of the reasons for attending. For example one young person said: '[I go to youth club] to get out of my house and away from my family'. Another young person said quite straightforwardly: 'happiness! I go to youth club to be happy!' Some young people did however acknowledge other, more significant, consequences of consistent engagement with the youth club, for example when discussing why they came to the club and how they described it to their friends, one young person said: 'I told them it's what keeps me out of shit these days'. As Robertson (2005) reflected on the role youth clubs fulfil - it is vital for young people to form social networks away from their family. But

this research builds on this and begins to shed light on the wider significance that youth clubs play in the lives of young people.

Youth Work Process

The second over-arching theme of the 'youth work process' perhaps surprisingly emerged later on in the analysis. At first it appeared that few young people mentioned the youth work process. However as the data was studied in more depth it became evident that many of responses were encapsulated under this theme, as their experience of open access youth work was informed and underpinned directly by the process of youth work. A process which is built on relationships which as Ord (2007: 53) makes clear are: 'the guiding thread of the process'. In this sense youth work 'relationships are the starting point' (ibid) for the process and it is out of the understanding gained through the establishment and development of relationships that: 'priorities are articulated; and this importantly is as the young people see them' (ibid). This process of 'working with' young people on their terms in a respectful and accepting manner (Jefferies & Smith, 2005) is integral to the process of youth work. However it is also: 'seeking to go beyond where young people start, in particular by encouraging them to be outward looking, critical and creative in their responses to their experience and the world around them' (Davies, 2015: 100). The culture of acceptance discussed previously underpins association and is also a product of the relationships that have been built up and established.

Many of the responses which link to the theme of relationships linking to the youth work process emerged from discussions about how things had changed for the young people. For example in the following exchange:

- Young person: 'I used to be all hard sometimes and like, threaten people, mainly (named young person) when he upset my mates. Then for some reason I stopped and now I just come in and be normal'.
- Researcher: 'yea we've had some conversations about that haven't we'
- Young person: 'yea, you spoke to me in the office, its ok now I think I needed it'.

Later in the same focus group another young person made reference to not wanting to be excluded from the club, 'even though there's people here that wind me up I

don't cause any trouble...well not much anyway'. When questioned why he is able to control his behaviour now. He replied 'well cos we don't want to get kicked out I guess'. These comments do not make explicit reference to the skills of the youth workers or the process that has been worked through. The youth work process has underpinned the alteration in the way the young people deal with certain situations. Implicit in these comments is a recognition of the process of developmental change that has taken place, based on an engagement over time between a youth worker and a young person, an important part of which is the trust established within the relationship between the youth worker and the young person.

Often framed as 'positive activities', youth work policy has placed as increasing emphasis on the importance of activities in recent years (DfCSF, 2007; DfE, 2011). Activities have traditionally also been an essential element of open access youth work as Spence (2001: 171) makes clear: 'activities are a framework around which the educational aspects of the work with young people are structured'. However what is of more importance are the conversations that develop during, or as a consequence of the activity, not the activity itself. As Ord makes clear the activities are: 'not ends in themselves but are a means to an end' (2007: 67).

The centre within which this research was undertaken is not well resourced and whilst perhaps the comments perhaps reflect how the club could be improved. The activities or lack of them do not feature particularly highly in the young people's priorities. For example when the researcher asked 'we don't have much stuff to do or expensive equipment, does that matter? One reply included: 'I like doing art and I'm glad you have more canvasses' and others wanted more arts sessions. When young people were specifically asked what they wanted from a session – 'more activities or more chances to sit and chill'? One replied 'Probably like, a bit of both. So like you can have things out and ready for people when and if they want to do it and more than what we have already got, but then if people just want to chat and mingle then that's fine too'. Many young people were however evidently not particularly concerned by the activities on offer or the offer of taking part in additional activities, as evidenced by one young person who said: 'nah we don't care'.

Whilst this approach accords with the NYA (2001) value of affording young people with the right to choose and make decisions for themselves. When asked what

makes the club 'good' the following response echoes many of the young people's feelings that what is important is 'the youth workers are really easy to talk to and we can just come in and do whatever we want, like hang out with our mates'.

Interestingly, although there is some interest in the activities on offer within the centre this is of secondary importance. The research acknowledges that the space provided enables an opportunity for young people to be both themselves, be with both other peers and youth workers, and enables them to both relax and engage in conversations. It is notable that this approach contrasts markedly with the dominant policy approach which emphasises activity based programmes and is outcomes and target driven (Smith, 2003; Ord, 2007; Davies, 2008) such as the National Citizenship Service.

The research evidently affirms young people's need for a safe place to meet friends and socialise but also hints at a deeper level of need being met within open access youth work. As Brent (2004) articulated the life of a youth club can provide a foundation for 'personal transformation'. Such changes are premised on the provision of a safe place to meet friends and socialise but it is also an incidental consequence (Brookfield, 1983) of a process of engagement in the 'club' environment. For example one young person describes how she now feels more confident through her experiences of the youth club:

'Yea I can actually [remember my first time] it was really cool, we all made friends, I met Katrina and Sian and it was really cool cos it helped me with my confidence...It helped me so much with my confidence'

It must be acknowledged that such open access youth centres are not a 'Shang ri la' where everything is ideal and open access youth clubs should not be idealised. It is evident from the data that the youth club caters for a diverse range of needs and meeting these represents a challenge. For example some young people prefer the club when it is 'quiet and lovely', others are happier when it is 'hectic'. It is evident that whilst youth work is committed to establishing and maintaining a practice which 'is volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees' (In Defence of Youth Work, 2014). This can provide a challenge to inclusivity (Batsleer, 2009). For example one young person who has a hearing impairment found that the noise creates feedback on her hearing aid and said that

'sometimes I like, have to go outside'. The research recognised that a combination of a diverse group young people with differing needs produces complex group dynamics and this can represent a challenge to youth workers in open access settings. This is not insurmountable but does require skilled youth workers and it can take time to establish the relationships necessary for the club to prosper. However voluntary participation (Davies, 2005) and the resulting free expression of the young people do provide the foundation of this much needed youth work practice.

Significance of the findings

The findings are significant both in terms of the critique it offers of current youth work policy and in the light it sheds on how we understand young people's social relationships. Contemporary youth work policy places an over emphasis on targeted youth work, orientated to the pro-social development of individuals. This primarily focuses on 1-1 encounters between young people and youth workers and is specifically aimed at rectifying identified 'problems'. This research evidences the benefits of group formation and identity for young people in social spaces of their own choosing. Whilst these spaces can be challenging both for young people and youth workers, and require highly skilled practitioners to manage the complex group dynamics. The benefit of the interdependence that is generated in such groups settings, enables a depth of interaction and learning which is absent from the more restricted 1-1 targeted work.

This research, although small scale, is a timely exploration of young people's experiences of open access youth work. It includes how the young people came to be engaged in open access youth work, the motivations for continuing to attend, but importantly it communicates 'what the sessions mean to them'. The young people's responses have been rigorously analysed and the outcomes of the research provide a stark 'mirror' to both recent outcomes and programme focused policy. It also offers a critique of current National and local policy on youth work, which has seen local authorities drastically cutting budgets and closing open access youth clubs (Unison, 2014; NYCYS, 2013) as well as youth work resources being increasingly re-directed to targeted one to one provision (DfES, 2003; DfCSF, 2005, 2006). Whilst the recent government policy 'Positive for Youth' (DfE, 2011) has little recognition of youth work as a distinctive practice, let alone gives any credence to the merits of open access

youth work, this research highlights the significance open access youth work has for young people's sense of belonging and identity.

This remains an under research area and the findings echo but build on the seminal research by Williamson (1996) which identified open access youth work meeting a need for: association, activities, advice and autonomy. This research process has given a contemporary voice to this debate from a group of marginalised young people from a deprived community. It has demonstrated some of the unique qualities of open access youth work. Superficially this includes the opportunity to take part in activities and a place to meet their friends but this research exemplifies a deeper level of need that open access spaces meet. These include providing a sense of belonging and acceptance where this is lacking in other areas of their lives. The research also demonstrates how the unique relationships which are fostered in such an environment (both between young people and youth workers and amongst young people themselves) are valued by young people. It also evidences how the interdependence generated in the 'club' setting facilitates behavioural change and growth. It also demonstrates how both attendance and acceptance at the youth club, as a result of the relationships that develop, enable them to feel accepted within the community. This research provides evidence to suggest it is time to stem the tide of cuts to open access provision and the closure of youth centres and: '[re]cultivate associational life' (Smith, 2005 np).

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