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Development Council

Connexions 'Active Involvement' agenda and integrated working

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Practitioner-led research 2008-2009

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This report is part of CWDC's Practitioner-Led Research (PLR) programme. Now in its third year, the programme gives practitioners the opportunity to explore, describe and evaluate ways in which services are currently being delivered within the children's workforce.

Working alongside mentors from Making Research Count (MRC), practitioners design and conduct their own small-scale research and then produce a report which is centred around the delivery of Integrated Working.

The reports are used to improve ways of working, recognise success and provide examples of good practice.

This year, 41 teams of practitioners completed projects in a number of areas including:

- Adoption
- Bullying
- CAF
- Child trafficking
- Disability
- Early Years
- Education Support
- Parenting
- Participation
- Social care
- Social work
- Travellers
- Youth

The reports have provided valuable insights into the children and young people's workforce, and the issues and challenges practitioners and service users face when working in an integrated environment. This will help to further inform workforce development throughout England.

This practitioner-led research project builds on the views and experiences of the individual projects and should not be considered the opinions and policies of CWDC.

Connexions 'Active Involvement' agenda and integrated working

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Abstract

This research explores the links between Connexions 'Active Involvement' agenda and integrated working, and focuses upon local examples and interviews from Coventry and Warwickshire. Connexions One Stop Shops are taken as a particular focus of the report. Some of the issues arising from part of a wider national debate about the principles of statutory work with young people and the differences between professions and disciplines were explored as part of this work.

This report highlights some of these important dilemmas, and indicates where there may be scope for further reflection or research by practitioners and strategists working in the integrated youth support services.
The report features examples of how returning to the views of young people can be helpful in unlocking tensions. It also explores some of the different meanings, expectations and purposes of participation by young people within the context of youth support work. The report discusses the different theoretical bases of young people's professions as they increasingly converge around the integrated working agenda.
The key learning points from the research include:

- the integrated working agenda throws up some genuine theoretical dilemmas about the basis on which different professionals are working with young people
- co-located 'hub' working can force different services to confront the different ideological positions of their profession
- young people's participation can be one tool which helps professionals re-evaluate organizational priorities and unlock conflicts by reverting back to young people's actual experiences.

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Introduction

This research explores the links between Connexions 'Active Involvement' agenda, and integrated working. It focuses on local examples and interviews from Coventry and Warwickshire. Connexions One Stop Shops are taken as a particular focus of the report. Some of the issues arising form part of a wider national debate about the principles of statutory work with young people and the differences between professions, and disciplines. This report highlights some of these important dilemmas, and indicates where there may be scope for further reflection or research by practitioners and strategists involved with forming youth support services.

The main theoretical model informing this research is Hart's ladder of participation. 'Active involvement' has been the particular term used to describe participation within the Connexions Service from its initial design to its implementation.

Methodology

The lead researcher Kris Benington (Research and Evaluation Adviser) was assisted in this work by Connexions peer mentor Liam Dukes. Liam led on conducting the interviews with young people, after he and Kris had jointly worked on question design.

- Ten face to face interviews with young people with follow-up work were conducted between December 2008 and February 2009.

- Eight face to face and telephone interviews were conducted with professionals from Connexions, Coventry & Warwickshire Youth Services and local authorities. In addition, Bernard Davies, consultant and specialist on the history, practice and principles of youth work was interviewed for this report.

- One discussion group with 12 young people was facilitated on 28 January 2009.

A review of the literature framed the research in context.

Young people interviewed had been involved with Connexions locally over the last two years. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, or detailed notes taken.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical starting point is from Hart's ladder of participation (included in full in the appendix to this report).

More recent policy documents which impact on the analysis and are relevant to this report are:

> *Youth Matters* (July 2005) – especially as the blueprint for forming Integrated Youth Support Services by local authorities within the Every Child Matters framework.
> *Russell Commission* (March 2005).
> *Power Inquiry* (February 2006).

The principles of participation in youth work were explored in various documents including *Empowering Young People* (Carnegie, 2008), *Play participation and potential* (Davies, Groundwork UK, 2005).

Context – the development of Connexions and One Stop Hubs

Connexions first started delivering services for young people in 2001. It aimed to develop a new support service for all young people aged 13–19 in England, funded from central government rather than local authority level. Its conception and strategy had grown out of a range of the Labour government's previous analysis and policy documents. The key documents in this cycle are *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE, 1999), *Bridging the Gap* (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), Learning and Skills Act (2000), *Connexions – The Best Start in Life for Every Young Person* (DfES, 2000).

Although many commentators now see Connexions as being motivated by one particular New Labour agenda, it is easy to forget that its formation was also based on a strong body of research and consultation by the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) with young people themselves, about their experiences of using statutory and voluntary youth support services. These 'Youth Support' services included homeless provision, financial and welfare support, youth offending services, leaving care, substance use, sexual health, youth work, careers advice, employment or training advice.

A central idea in this early conception of Connexions came from the SEU findings that young people favoured a 'One Stop Hub', where multi-agency services would be brought together around a single common delivery point. In its conception, Connexions started out with a strong 'integrated working' agenda, with many similar aims to those now being implemented through Children's Trusts and Integrated Youth Support Services (IYSS) at local authority level.

As Connexions got under way the programme encountered increasing resistance and opposition from different professions dealing with young people. One senior Connexions manager interviewed said that tensions in this formative period were escalated by central government 'banging the drums' continuously in the background, promising more and more money and priority

to Connexions, and presenting it as the inevitable replacement of services that had gone before it, rather than as a speculative enterprise to restructure and improve front-line services to young people.

In the face of professional and political resistance, central government increasingly backed off from the original Connexions vision of integrated working, and the funding and policy incentives necessary to drive the creation of One Stop Hubs was quietly withdrawn.

In its place Connexions Coventry & Warwickshire continued to develop One Stop Shops throughout the sub-region, which were central access points for young people, led by Connexions, with additional partnership working and surgeries delivered on top.

With the formation of Integrated Youth Support Services, the One Stop Hub for young people is back on the agenda, but now led from local authority level.

Findings

This section draws together some of the key thematic findings from the interviews with young people, the interviews with staff, and discussion groups, conducted for the research. To reflect on these emerging themes, three examples of local practice are featured.

Dilemmas around consultation and participation

One finding from this study is that, in practice, involvement and participation of young people mean different things to different professional agencies. There are differences in purpose, guiding philosophy, and method which often arise from distinctive differences within the professions. So participation for youth workers stems from a different set of aims than the 'Active Involvement' agenda of Connexions.

Such issues which have a wider national resonance are emphasized as they arise from the discussion of the three local examples below.

Example 1 – Applied, task focused involvement

From the interviews with staff and young people, one of the strongest local examples of effective involvement of young people by Connexions has been in the design of One Stop Shops throughout Coventry and Warwickshire.

These structured consultation exercises in Coventry, Leamington, Rugby, Stratford, Nuneaton have had an applied remit. In Coventry & Warwickshire Connexions, the design of all One Stop Shops developed since 1999 has had a central input from young people through an established set of involvement procedures working to a specific brief:

Namely, a One Stop Shop is to be created or upgraded locally – its purpose, and operation is not in question in this exercise (see example 2 for this). In these cases Connexions specifically wanted young people to be involved in determining the architectural blueprint, physical design and layout of the Connexions delivery points.

This process could therefore be seen as operating around rung 5 of Hart's participation ladder – Consulted and informed.

The main aim of these active involvement exercises was not the personal development of young people, although this was a valued additional outcome of the process; rather it was to improve the layout, design and building of services.

Therefore the scope of participation was not primarily emancipatory but constructive.

When asked about this process, the young people participating were actually extremely positive about the practical scale and the limitations imposed on their remit. In the One Stop Shop consultation process, the parameters of their influence were explained, along with the needs and purpose of the Connexions Service. Following training and briefings, the culmination of the process was for young people to form the complete panel which selected their preferred design from three competing architects each putting forward a tender. Ongoing feedback from all young people using the Connexions Service had already formed part of the architects' brief and the architects were aware that their pitch would be ultimately determined by young people. In every case the young people's selection went on to be implemented.

In their interviews and group sessions about this consultation, consistent themes emerged about the young people's views of this process:

A representative response from one young woman was that she had not always felt she had as great an influence in other forums

> 'but here we know we have an impact'.

Although interviewees appreciated other participation exercises which aimed at their development, they said these often had less focused tangible results. What interviewees said they particularly prized about the One Stop Shop involvement process was taking part in practical and applied decisions which had a focused visible outcome (the newly designed facility springing up in the town).

> 'Youth Council is more spread out, but with this you feel your views are used more'.

Several said that it was developing the professional decision-making role, with its applied implementation, that was the best part of this process. Thus, a key

benefit highlighted by young people was the experience of operating in a professional environment, and in becoming confident in their own judgement and ability to make decisions.

> 'Our views were taken seriously, as though we were part of their staff, not just young people with their particular ideas.'

The positive qualities emphasized included 'being professional', 'being treated as adults', 'being taken seriously', 'making a practical difference', 'having a lasting influence', 'helping the organization to improve services for other young people'.

The Connexions Service has restrictions and targets from central government, many of which are not open to influence by young people. Nevertheless, the above example is a reminder that involvement with a restricted practical purpose can be a valued development activity for young people. In fact, participating with and exerting influence over 'harder' government services was one of the most prized and unique parts of the experience.

Example 2 – Early integrated working – Coventry One Stop development

Coventry One Stop Shop was created just before the advent of Connexions. This was the result of consultation with local young people (supported by funding) about how they wanted their services configured. At its heart there was and remains a strong partnership between the careers service (now Connexions) and the Coventry Youth Service.

From the local consultation in 1999, core principles identified were:

- young people wanted services delivered in one place, regardless of organization
- they wanted a universal access point which wouldn't identify them as being 'different' ('offender', 'unemployed' etc).

These principles were consistent with the emerging Connexions Strategy (2000), of which the Coventry One Stop Shop (OSS) became a central service. Central government research has again found the same preferences among young people with the 2005 *Breaking the Cycle* report.

The Connexions One Stop Shop agenda which arose from the wishes of young people was arguably sidelined by political and ideological tensions among professionals and not from any change in the preferences of young people themselves.

Softening protectiveness

A joint interview with the Coventry OSS manager (Connexions) and the OSS Youth Team manager, (Coventry Youth Service) threw up multiple examples of the dilemmas and challenges to integrated working which they have confronted working together over the past ten years.

For example, in the early days of the Coventry OSS there was found to be a 'protectiveness' among both services, or a focus on how the youth workers were different from the Connexions personal advisers and vice versa – each having a different agenda, and working to a different philosophy about young people.

In forming the One Stop Shop, youth workers were involved largely in voluntary person centred personal development and groupwork programmes, whereas personal advisers had a more 'outcome-led' focus around literacy, numeracy, employment, and benefits claims. This led to teams operating independently of one another, with different types and times of appointments.

However, it soon became clear to both sets of staff that the young people were much less aware of, interested in or committed to these organizational distinctions.

Working together, learning and compromise

In the early days of the Coventry One Stop Shop, consistent feedback given to advisers, and also formally via feedback forms, was that young people couldn't understand why they were often waiting a long time to see one 'kind' of worker (up to 45 minutes), while other workers were standing around, apparently available.

As a result of the accumulation of this feedback, OSS managers trialled a reconfigured approach: advisers would now be part of a common pool. The Connexions and Youth Service managers said the wishes of young people forced a softening of their organisational boundaries, moving from a position of 'this is what we do' to 'what can I do to best help this particular young person?'. The fact that young people were drawn to the One Stop Shop on a wide range of platforms, from voluntary, to compulsory, to meet benefits requirements or seeking work, added to the complexity.

This 'pool' of available advisers was found to suit young people much better. It pushed the consequences of organizational identity issues back onto the staff, reducing their impact on young people.

A specific example given was that, previously, youth service staff had not generally wanted to get involved with benefits applications which were part of a system with preconditions which were in conflict with youth-work principles of voluntarism and client-led development.

However, under the new co-located arrangement, when youth workers were confronted with a young person whose overriding concern was getting his or her benefit claim completed properly, responding to the needs of the young person in front of them meant staff had to start to engage with benefits procedures.

Bernard Davies, a specialist on youth work (see section 2 above) has some interesting perspectives on these dilemmas which are increasingly faced by youth workers. Davies firmly believes that the retaining of individual organizational specialisms and principles is the best way of preserving the expertise and standards that guarantee the highest quality service for young people. However, he also feels that such new integrated working arrangements can force professionals to learn from one another about the strengths and values of each profession. So, a good youth worker might be able to demonstrate to colleagues the way a benefits application can be used as an opportunity to explore the young person's potential, build trust, and develop confidence. Alternatively, a Connexions personal adviser may be able to emphasize to youth workers the statutory barriers facing that young person which need resolving before developmental work can start. Davies sees integrated working as presenting new opportunities for getting to grips with genuine professional distinctions, rather than as an excuse to dissolve all organizational boundaries.

Some organizational blurring seems to become inevitable once different agencies and services start to be 'co-located' around a single location or Hub for young people. The desire for different professionals to make things work with their colleagues, 'pull their weight', and get involved with the young people in front of them may prove to be the drive which forces a softening of fixed theoretical positions.

Co-location presents opportunities to move forward, but it also presents risks. A key risk is that when professionals are faced with discomfort and disagreement in relation to the ideology of another profession, each discipline may well retreat back to its own familiar safe position, essentially drawing the battle lines. Reverting back to a fundamentalist position in a time of organizational change is understandable, and there *will* be core principles which cannot be compromised if the integrity of a profession is to be retained. A challenge for integrated working is to see ideological tensions as opportunities for reflection, learning, compromise, and growth among professionals, especially when guided by the wishes and needs of young people themselves.

In this example the wishes of young people for increased integration forced workers to re-evaluate their positions.

Example 3 – Overcoming strategic impasses – consulting young people

The final featured example illustrating the relationship between involvement and integrated working is an encouraging one.

In their interviews, managers highlighted examples where conflicts and disagreements at the strategic level between different organizations had been unlocked by going back to what young people actually said they wanted. Examples were given where coming back to focus on the young people's expressed priorities was a 'wake-up call' to different strategists who may have

become locked into their own institutional priorities. Managers said that young people's voices could often get lost at the executive level.

One senior manager believes breakthroughs are always possible because the majority of young people's workers are genuinely committed to young people themselves. Looking at the problem from the point of view of the young person reminded them that there was another perspective to prioritize. Involvement of young people should be an important part of determining priorities and procedures at the executive level, as well as at the level of the individual personal development of young people.

A good example was cited about the planning for Warwickshire's Children's Trust over the last few years. In deciding the formal priorities for the Children's Plan, there was disagreement between agencies about whether to explicitly name 'reducing bullying' as a priority. There was a split within the Trust, with some influential parties not wanting to include this, and others feeling it was important. The split was largely on theoretical lines about whether it made sense to highlight and emphasize this problem.

The interviewee described how this impasse was overcome by going back to the voice of young people. The stronger argument became not what is logical from managers' theoretical positions but from the perspective of young people themselves. In a recent county-wide consultation, young people had explicitly identified 'staying safe' and 'not being bullied' as their top two priorities. Here, aligning with the stated priorities of young people was important in overcoming the impasse. The Children's Plan was drawn up with 'bullying' a stated area of priority, in line with young people's concerns.

In the ideal world examples such as these would be standard good practice in organizations working with young people, but interviewees felt that in practice, especially at the more strategic and executive level of integrated working, it was necessary to keep remembering to return to young people's views as a guiding principle for shaping services.

Discussion: power, participation and practicalities

In conducting this research we have encountered some fundamental ideological dilemmas about the way young people should participate with the state. A key part of the youth work 'participation' philosophy relates to power – it aims to empower young people and give them a more equal and even a leading role in the development of services. On the other hand, Connexions, children's trusts and IYSS are setting about providing services as part of a wider government policy agenda, with its own aims and expectations, often with a 'crisis intervention' or practical outcome emphasis on youth support services.

Dilemmas inherent in fulfilling both service delivery and participation agendas include how to structure services which can accommodate the conflicting

wishes and needs of all groups of young people (e.g. both victim of bullying and instigator). This also introduces the concept of the organization's own needs, which may be completely different from and even incompatible with the needs of the users of those services, and even more incompatible with their wishes.

Helping to establish safety and security for vulnerable young people, in a way which is respectful, retains trust, and is empowering is a goal of principled youth support workers. However, the practical outcome is arguably the primary focus.

As such youth support is not youth work, nor should it aspire to be.

Equally 'participation' in youth work has some clear principles and parameters which other statutory youth support services may be unable to fulfil. This does not mean that young people shouldn't participate with those agencies, but that, strictly, 'involvement' should not be defined as 'participation' if it does not fulfil these principles.

Youth work has benefited from some principled reflection and analysis which has led to some explicit cohesive principles which have united the discipline and shaped its collective identity and culture. However, 'youth-support' is a much more nebulous activity, with a less cohesive set of defining principles. The empowering values of a worker in the field of youth offending may be very similar to those outlined above, and shared by other professions; however, structurally the role, the aims and therefore the methods will inevitably be different from those of a voluntary youth worker or sexual health adviser.

Analysis of these findings suggests it would be beneficial for all youth support workers to reflect on the core values they have in common, which should be sustained whatever part of the statutory agenda they are fulfilling. Good practice in working with all vulnerable groups involves balancing respect, boundaries and empowerment with welfare and protection needs. These tensions are well known in other support work professions such as social work and homelessness support. It is important that youth workers are not the only young people's professionals working to the principles of anti-oppressive practice.

In Warwickshire the new Integrated Youth Support Service is introducing universal training in work with young people for all its workers, an important step in strengthening the common value base of youth support workers, and increasing the cohesion among disparate youth support traditions.

Both Carnegie UK and Davies highlight power relationships as a central aspect of Youth Work Participation:

> 'In other words, even though for both parties this can feel risky and rather scary, it assumes some genuine shifts of power between young and old within our society.' (Davies, Groundwork UK, 2005)

This raises theoretical challenges for other youth support disciplines. For example, is the idea of service deliverers giving equal power to the users of those services a truthful position? Where structural power imbalances exist, which may be based on role as much as age, is equality a realistic outcome? (For example, in organizations where young people are delivering services to other young people, it may be their *role*, not their age, which presents the structural power imbalance.)

This area is explored in 'The Empowerment Dilemma: The Dialectic of Emancipation and Control in staff/client Interaction at Shelters for Battered Women':

> 'The dialectic of emancipation and control describes the tension within a relationship when one person is trying to empower another person over whom they have authority or control.'

> 'The shelter workers' accounts provided evidence of four different properties of the power structure of their relationship with clients: a circumstantial dichotomy, contrasting experiences, asymmetrical roles, and resource control.'

> (Mary Vaughn and Glen H. Stamp (2003), *Communication Studies*, Volume 54)

It is well beyond the scope of this study to pursue this interesting line of enquiry, however, it should be an important area for reflection among those trying to develop empowering youth support roles.

In this research many of the young people interviewed said they often appreciated the restricted but 'real' power they exercised during consultation, above an impression of power, but 'without teeth', that they had experienced in some other participation forums.

One young person interviewed said she felt working on One Stop Shop design had helped her maturity as a result of participating within real-world limits, and that this was good preparation for her future life:

> 'It helped my career development – there were high standards expected and real challenges, but this made you more determined to meet them – to satisfy the workers whilst satisfying yourself...'.

In other cases, young people interviewed said they took being given a limited amount of actual influence as a sign of being respected and taken seriously by more established adults.

Conclusion

This research highlights how the ideological differences between different professions are still important and influential today, although they might appear more subsumed within an integrated working agenda. It is clear that for future integrated youth support services to be sustainable, some of these differences will need to be addressed further. Consultation, participation and involvement are areas in which ideological differences can surface, and be confronted.

These differences will not come as a surprise to many working with young people. The research is timely though, since IYSS seems to demand variations on the Hub model, which will increasingly require co-location and the confrontation of organizational distinctions and principles once again.

This research has found that perspectives which are purely ideologically led can lead to entrenchment and standstill among professionals. One way beyond this is to remain focused on the logic of services from the young person's level – this is still a principled perspective, but one based on the service user's experience rather than the ideologies of professionals. It is an applied principled position rather than a fundamentalist one.

Future statutory youth support services will inevitably be led by the central political policy agenda; the IYSS now places many Connexions targets and philosophies on the shoulders of local authorities. In the ideal world this may not be how youth services should be built up. However, recognizing actual service user experience, and making young people's overall encounter with professionals and services a consistent and comprehensible one, may prove an important way of establishing young people's long-term trust and engagement.

Key learning points and recommendations

- The integrated working agenda throws up some genuine theoretical dilemmas about the basis on which different professions work with young people.

- These differences would benefit from further attention and exploration when configuring future integrated services.

- The full range of established youth support traditions would benefit from some explicit exploration of their shared values and ideals.

- The ongoing young people's One Stop/Hub agenda may confront Children's Trusts and integrated youth support services with some challenges already encountered by Connexions.

- Young people sometimes respect the integrity of participation which offers limited but genuine expressions of their power, above emancipatory focused processes which have less tangible impact, or which they do not find credible.

- Interacting with the statutory limitations, policy agendas and mainstream expectations of government services does not inevitably alienate young people. Rather, participants may well find the process educative, constructive and reassuring regarding their ability to play a part in established structures, as well as increasing their confidence regarding their ability to participate in the working adult community in the future.

- The emancipation of young people is not necessarily the primary purpose of statutory youth support services. For integrated young people's services, the relative priorities of empowerment, safety, support, advice and resolving practical crises will be important areas for ongoing discussion for the foreseeable future.

- Co-located working can force different services to confront the different ideological positions of their professions. Keeping focused on the opportunities for learning and growth should be an important part of forming integrated youth support services.

- Young people's participation can be one tool which helps professionals re-evaluate organizational priorities and unlock conflicts by coming back to young people's actual experiences.

- As well as participation having clear benefits for young people, there can also be major strategic benefits for the professionals involved.

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The Children's Workforce Development Council leads change so that the thousands of people and volunteers working with children and young people across England are able to do the best job they possibly can.

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