Proving Our Worth? Youth Work, 'Race' and Evidence

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Abstract

The Education Select Committee Inquiry into Services for Young People has raised challenging issues around the impact and benefit of publicly-funded youth work, explicitly suggesting that the evidence base for the positive impact of such work is limited. This article suggests that such an assertion is misplaced, and contributes to the assembly of data around the positive impact of youth work by drawing on existing academic evidence to examine impact in relation to issues of 'race', racism and ethnic identity. In doing so, it suggests that any discussion of 'impact' should not simply accept limited and mechanistic understandings of impact in relation to what youth workers do with young people, but should also consider what youth work enables policy-makers to know and understand about the experiences and perspectives of young people, what it tells us about society when youth work provision is not available, and how key public policies are actually understood, operationalised and experienced at ground level. In this way, the article also argues for more youth work-based research that examines youth work's engagement with policy initiatives and important social problems.

Key words: Race; Cohesion; Youth Work; Evidence; Extremism

THE RECENT House of Commons Education Select Committee Inquiry into, and resulting report on Services to Young People (2011) has raised challenging issues for all those committed to youth work, whether they are practitioners, managers or academics. Whilst the Select Committee Inquiry process put a helpful spotlight on current cuts to provision and the need for greater resources, it also posed hard questions about what government gets for its investment from youth work, and what evidence there is for any positive impact from that investment: 'We experienced great difficulty in finding objective evidence of the impact of services, whether in the guise of thematic research studies by academics and independent bodies, or of evaluations of individual Services' (House of Commons, 2011:Para.30).

This is not a new challenge, as it has been there throughout the post-war history of the maintained youth service (Davies, 1999), and has certainly been growing over the past twenty years as part of a much wider scrutiny of what public spending achieves. Nevertheless, the combination of significant public spending cuts by the Coalition government, and the overt, ideologically-driven quest for a smaller and leaner state that arguably underpins them, means that all concerned with the

future of publicly-funded youth work need to rise to this challenge for meaningful evidence around impact and benefit. As both a Youth and Community Work lecturer, and an active researcher who has researched and published material drawn from studying youth work practice over the past ten years, I would agree with those who suggested to the Select Committee that youth work already has strong and meaningful evidence of its positive impact and worth. However, I would also accept that we have not been as good as we could have been at either publicising and utilising the research material we do have, or making the most of the possibilities of gathering impact data of interest and value beyond the profession itself. For that reason, the Select Committee's recommendation that government should commission, 'a meta analysis of studies relating to the impact and effectiveness of youth services' (Para.36) is welcomed, and a challenge that we all need to engage with.

On that basis, this article offers some first thoughts and, hopefully, helpful perspectives, on the positive impact of youth work methods and content, not just on young people, but also on wider communities, and on governmental attempts to tackle social problems and implement effective policy responses. The article focuses on issues of 'race', racism and ethnicity in society, drawing on my experience of researching around anti-racism, community cohesion, ethnic identity and preventing violent extremism. This focus may sound like what the Select Committee termed a 'thematic research study', but my research involvement leads me to suggest that, around this area of research, we have evidence not only of what youth work can achieve in work with young people, but of what it tells us about young people's experiences in society, of what happens when youth work isn't there for young people, and how major governmental policy initiatives impact on, and are understood and utilised by, youth work and young people. Two personal examples of this are my utilising youth work-based research evidence to give oral evidence testimony in December 2009 to the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Select Committee into the *Preventing Violent Extremism* policy initiative (House of Commons, 2010), and drawing on youth-work based evidence in discussing progress towards ethnic cohesion in Oldham on BBC 2's Newsnight programme in May 2011. In this way, the article aims to not only contribute ideas for the evidence/impact audit of youth work practice, but to argue for a wider and more holistic understanding of what sorts of impact evidence youth work can and does offer government and society.

What we know about young people

In the rush to produce evidence about what youth work does to young people, there is the danger of ignoring the valuable insights as to what it enables us to *know* and *understand* about young people, and their lives, experiences and perspectives. Such knowledge and understanding is not just academic, in both senses of the word, because it can and should enable policy-makers to understand better the objects of their focus, young people and their communities, and so refine and improve policy approaches, rather than getting them wrong. Getting policy and its implementation wrong

can be costly for everyone involved, with one example being the periodic bouts of urban rioting, largely involving ethnic minority young people, that have taken place in Britain between the 1970s and the summer of 2011. The 2001 riots in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, of which we have just marked the tenth anniversary, were highly-damaging, with the most serious rioting in Bradford in early July 2001 leading to 326 Police officers and 14 members of the public injured, and damage estimated at £7.5-10 million (Denham, 2001). Such events, and the on-going problems of gang violence in many British inner-city areas, show how important it is to know and understand better the lives of young people and why they sometimes react as they do. Two of the most important British sociological studies of the last couple of decades around young people, ethnicity and 'race' have been carried out in youth work settings, in both cases by people who were not long-term professional youth workers, but who chose to take on paid youth work roles whilst carrying out their ethnographical doctoral research into young people's lives and experiences. Les Back's 1996 book *New Ethnicities and Urban Cultures*, which explored the complex and contingent attitudes of young people towards racial difference, remains a highly important work. Carrying out his research in youth projects in Bermondsey, south London, Back highlighted how white young people treated African-Caribbean people with (some) respect in certain, specific situations, whilst being virulently racist towards the area's south-east Asian community. This study provided real evidence to support emerging academic debates about new ethnicities, 'racisms' and the increasingly cultural basis of racial hatred. Claire Alexander's 2000 book, The Asian Gang, was also researched whilst the Bengali-origin author was working with Bangladeshi young men at a youth project in east London. The book provided a fascinating portrayal of young people's peer group loyalties and operations, as well as how the young men negotiated relationships with parents and older people in the community and with, in their eyes, often racist white society. This evidence helped Alexander to suggest, before the events of 9/11 and the 2001 riots, that society was developing an increasing 'moral panic' about Asian young men.

The fact that both these important books, which provided real insights into Britain's increasingly diverse but also increasingly racially-tense society, were researched through youth work settings was no coincidence. What we know about youth work is that its voluntary basis and informal education approach enables a depth and quality of relationship between youth workers and young people regularly using the provision that is increasingly hard to replicate in any other form of state-funded educational provision (Smith, 1982). Such relationships of honesty and trust between workers and young people enable the gaining of important insights, and of research data, if gathered systematically and carefully. That insight prompted my colleague Pete Sanderson and me to launch the Youth Identity Project in Oldham and Rochdale, Greater Manchester between 2007 and 2009. My on-going research in the same geographical area around community cohesion, which is discussed further below, had suggested a need for greater understanding of how young people understood the 'identity' of themselves and 'others', and what their experiences were of ethnic segregation. It was that which led to the Youth Identity Project, funded by the Rochdale Pride

Partnership (the Local Strategic Partnership, which was utilising Prevent funding) and our own University of Huddersfield's Research Committee. Our view as researchers was that young people would be much more honest about highly-sensitive and controversial issues, such as ethnic identity and racial tensions, if they felt confident and fully trusted the researchers concerned. That led us to work collaboratively with the local authority youth services in both areas and a range of local third sector youth organisations, with the youth workers actually carrying out the research with young people with whom they worked. That was preceded by a series of training sessions and a process of collaboratively devising and refining a range of research methods, including interviews, questionnaires, word and sentence completion exercises, and an 'Identity ranking' exercise. The result was research data of depth and complexity (Thomas and Sanderson, 2009), much of which is in the process of being analysed and academically published (Thomas, forthcoming a; Thomas and Sanderson, forthcoming). However, more importantly, this data led to a presentation to the Rochdale Pride Partnership and has helped Rochdale shape future priorities for cohesion and education policy work in relation to young people. Another presentation of the Project's findings drew an audience from local authorities across the region, whilst the evidence from the Prevent-funded Youth Identity Project formed a key part of my evidence submission to the CLG Select Committee in December 2009 on how Prevent could and should be implemented more effectively.

What happens when youth work isn't there?

The discussion above outlined how simply having youth work provision available enables the gathering of real knowledge and understanding of young people and their experiences in society. What do we know about situations when youth work provision is not available? Again, the focus of 'race' and ethnicity provides concrete evidence, evidence often supplied by government itself, as to why not having youth provision is dangerous and damaging for wider society. The 2001 riots mentioned above provoked significant government analysis and re-thinking of policy approaches. The resulting new policy priority of community cohesion is discussed below, but the reports which analysed the context of the 2001 riots highlighted some very important issues about the availability and quality of youth work provision in the riot areas. Both the local and national reports produced in the wake of the 2001 disturbances highlighted the centrality of youth work's contribution to the situations leading directly to the disturbances, and on youth work's possible contribution to future progress. Ted Cantle, who led the government's Community Cohesion Review Team investigation into the disturbances, noted that: 'Facilities for young people, including those provided under the youth service are in a parlous state in many areas' (Cantle, 2001:31).

John Denham (2001), the then Home Officer Minister, and someone with a personal background in youth work through his previous employment at the British Youth Council, also highlighted the state of youth work provision, commenting in the government's response to Cantle that local post-riot reports had pinpointed the importance of good youth work provision: 'Both Ouseley

and Ritchie make direct links between the lack of youth facilities and involvement particularly of young men in anti-social behaviour'(Denham, 2001:15).

Denham went on to acknowledge the centrality of young people to a more positive future in ethnically-segregated towns and cities, and Section 3 of his report, 'Government's response: action taken and proposals for further action', had a whole section on 'Youth Services'. Within this, Denham highlighted government commitment to re-building youth work provision through the *Transforming Youth Work* agenda of the time, and using it to encourage cross-ethnic interaction and understanding. Whilst echoing the national calls for better-resourced youth work in Oldham, Ritchie (2001), in the local Oldham investigation, broke ranks with the national community cohesion reports in making an overt criticism of the pre-2001 youth work provision within Oldham. Here, the configuration and approach of Oldham Youth Service prior to 2001 was seen as a direct contributor to the disturbances, and to the extreme ethnic polarization that underlay them (Ritchie, 2001:47), in that the youth work provision available in Oldham prior to the 2001 disturbances had not done enough to divert young people away from boredom and trouble on the streets because of the only very limited availability of open access provision, and the total lack of ethnically-integrated provision.

In Ritchie's analysis, there had been a clear shift in the style and priorities of Local Authority Youth Service provided – youth work from the early 1980s onwards, both through generic changes to professional priorities and specifically, due to the interpretations of 'anti-racist' policy developments. These local changes could be traced back to the often-justified criticisms highlighted in the 'Thompson Report' (DES, 1982) of the 'traditional', open access, leisure-based youth club provision. In the wake of those criticisms that highlighted white male-dominated youth clubs with little educational content, local authority Youth Services throughout England and Wales gradually moved away from a reliance on open access provision towards provision focussed on education-based group work processes with smaller numbers of 'targeted' young people. Ritchie clearly saw this as a mistake, at least in the Oldham context, as he discussed the previous style of youth work:

> This was done in a way which the young people felt comfortable with. Now the emphasis in youth clubs is on social education. The informal element has been reduced and youth workers act more as teachers giving formal lessons on serious subjects. Young people are expected to be organized and become involved in 'projects', an alienating experience for many after a full day at school. Fewer youngsters therefore are involved in clubs (Ritchie, 2001:47).

That perspective saw youth work provision primarily as a leisure-based, diversionary activity that keeps young men 'off the streets'. Whilst the lack of such provision may have contributed to the short-term build up to the 2001 disturbances, and have felt necessary in the immediate aftermath, the history of the Youth Service nationally highlights how such open access provision

failed historically because it could not keep the interest, let alone meet the educational needs, of increasingly sophisticated young consumers with greater leisure options than their parents' generation (Davies,1999), whilst recent calls to 'reclaim the youth club' acknowledge criticisms (DES, 1982) of old style Albemarle clubs as failing to engage with pressing social and political realities. Above all, youth clubs too often seemed to be all about leisure and only intermittently about informal education that raised young people's horizons and which challenged their existing assumptions about society.

Nevertheless, Ritchie (2001) saw more youth clubs (possibly provided through the controversial PFI mechanism) in Oldham as a way forward, with the hope that they could be used by young people of all backgrounds. Ritchie concluded that: 'Sad to say we heard little but criticism of the Youth Service in Oldham' (2001:47).This criticism was not just about the youth work approach, with the local authority Youth Service characterised as over-stretched and as a low priority for the local authority, with harsh words for the physical state and opening hours of the Youth Service's clubs, and what was seen as a too-rapid move towards detached work methods without adequate planning and back-up (Ritchie, 2001:48). In 2001, Oldham's spending on youth work per head of the Youth population made it a mid-range Authority within the Greater Manchester conurbation, but half of the Youth Service's budget came from external sources – a pertinent issue as Youth Services nationally now face significant cuts to their base budgets. However, the fact that the 'Mahdlo centre', a new state of the art youth facility that is externally-funded through the 'Myplace' initiative, open all year around, and located centrally in what is still a town of significant ethnic segregation, will open in Oldham in January 2012 could mark a significant step forward for youth work's contribution to promoting community cohesion in Oldham.

This suggestion that poor youth facilities, or even their lack of availability, can directly lead to racial tension or even violent disorder is not a new one. The 1958 'race riots' (in the real sense of this much-misused term, as these riots did involve white and Black people fighting each other) in Nottingham and Notting Hill, west London were the first visible sign of a racist backlash to post-war non-white immigration, and inspired the Notting Hill Carnival as a community-building response. An investigation into youth offending written just three years later, and displaying much of the thoughtless racist language which was the norm at the time, highlighted the link between youth work availability and the group of young white men whose racist actions were seen as sparking the confrontations that ran for three days:

> *nine very ordinary working-class boys, six of them only seventeen, with previously blameless records. Yet upon hearing of previous race riots in Nottingham, the nine armed themselves with coshes… and savagely attacked any coloured pedestrians they met* (Fyvel, 1961:62).

The author went on to interview the Youth Leader of a local youth club that several of the nine

convicted had attended regularly, who commented that:

> *It all happened on a night the club wasn't open. Not knowing what to do with themselves,*
> *the idea came to them to have a go at the spades. Yet if they hadn't been at a loose end that*
> *night, they may never have started. At the club you might have said they were the sort of boys*
> *who wouldn't say boo to a goose, but once the excitement started, they were swept away by it*
> (cited in Fyvel, 1961:63).

It would be over-stating the case to say that the scenes of violent disorder and looting in a number of English towns and cities in the summer of 2011 were directly due to significant reductions in funding for statutory and voluntary sector youth work, both because such a causal link is always hard to prove, and because many of those cuts have not yet been fully-enacted. Nevertheless, a number of the media accounts of inner-London areas affected by rioting and looting highlighted the recent reduction in opening hours, or even closure, of local youth projects that offer both diversion and stability for young people who often have chaotic home lives. Hackney in east London, scene of some of the most serious disorder, has experienced a 75% cut to youth project funding in 2011, with eight of the borough's 13 youth centres closing (McVeigh, 2011).

In the twenty-five years that followed the 1958 riots, youth work and controversial issues of 'race' became increasingly inter-twined. Successive reports highlighted how the supposedly open access youth service of the post-Albemarle youth clubs did little to enable the participation of Black young people (in the accepted term of the era for ethnic minority people). The Community Relations Commission (the forerunner of the Commission for Racial Equality, now itself subsumed within the Equality and Human Rights Commission) published *Seen but not served* in 1976, which detailed the ethnic minority marginalisation from publicly-funded youth work, and the community response of self-help youth provision. This was re-iterated in the 1980 CRE publication, *The Fire next Time: Youth in a multi-racial society*, which extended that analysis of marginalisation and racist exclusion across society and accurately predicted the inner-city riots of the early 1980s that represented youth frustration with that racism combining with economic marginalisation. At that time, youth clubs were often the only places that urban Black and Asian youth were safe from racist white youth and blatantly racist police attention, with the result that youth clubs were often harassed by the police and represented a key site of community organisation and resistance (Gilroy, 2002). A response across the public sector to this exposure of systematic racist exclusion was a strengthening of multiculturalist approaches into anti-racist and equal opportunities policies, with the Youth Service going through often fraught but necessary internal and external battles to move forward towards more equal staffing and provision for young people, as an important study of the country's then-biggest youth service, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) Youth Service illustrated (Williams, 1988).

Learning from Conflicts

A vital part of the moves towards more substantial anti-racist and equal opportunities policies and procedures right across the public sector was anti-racist education, itself a critique of previous, well-meaning multiculturalist educational approaches that had neither addressed the real needs of marginalised Black young people, nor confronted the often taken for granted racist prejudices of many white young people (Chauhan, 1990). Such anti-racist educational policies were needed, and have continued to have a substantial and positive effect on many young people, but were also highly problematic in the interaction, and often the lack of it, between anti-racism and other forces and realities in society. Whilst this new phase of race relations policy known as anti-racism (Solomos, 2003) was embraced and developed enthusiastically by many youth work professionals post-1981 (Popple,1997; Davies,1999), the concept and its implementation with young people can be seen as highly problematic (Cohen, 1988; Hewitt, 1996; CRE,1999; Bhavnani, 2001). Concerns over anti-racism fundamentally focus on its essentialising and privileging of ethnicity that, ironically, mirrors the failings of multiculturalism (Bhavnani, 2001). Alongside this was the, at times, clumsy and draconian implementation of policies by some public bodies, highlighted most graphically by the 'Burnage Report" (Macdonald, 1989) into the murder of Bangladeshi-origin, Manchester school student Ahmed Ullah, by a white fellow pupil. Here, what was viewed popularly as a 'racist' murder occurred within the context of well-meaning but clumsy attempts to operationalise anti-racism within the school. The Inquiry Panel, largely made up of experienced, non-white, anti-racist activists, found that the draconian approaches to such policies had polarised staff, and alienated significant numbers of white pupils and parents, taking little account of their views or of their wider experiences. It also highlighted the simplicity of the 'racist/anti-racist' dichotomy at the heart of anti-racism by focussing on the complex reality of the murderer Darren Colbourne, a troubled young man who had exhibited both racist and anti-racist behaviour at different points (McDonald, 1989).

Similarly, we have clear and important evidence around how anti-racist educational approaches within youth work and schools, whilst well-intentioned, arguably contained fundamental flaws, such as the undialectical understanding of race, class and gender, built on an implicitly deficit understanding of the white working class (Cohen,1988: 86). Here, apparent white resistance to anti-racism can, in fact, be sometimes seen as part of a wider class resistance to the authoritarian and class-bound nature of compulsory schooling, or of youth work that seems to be adopting more formal educational styles and content. This suggests that 'compulsory' anti-racist education can, in fact, be counter-productive. The evidence around youth work's operationalisation of anti-racist educational strategies suggests that all too often it has reproduced the formal, didactic and draconian style of school-based approaches, leading to a 'white backlash' (Hewitt, 2005), and low levels of youth worker self-confidence and clarity around the purpose of this youth work practice (CRE,1999; Thomas, 2002).

Whilst acknowledging that 'white backlashes' can be identified throughout the history of social policy attempts to address racism (Law, 1996), anti-racist educational approaches, especially those aimed at white working class young people, seem to have often not worked as hoped or intended. Indeed, some of the strongest evidence here was commissioned by Greenwich Youth Service in south-east London in recognition that existing policy and practice approaches to anti-racism had not been effective with many white young people (Hewitt, 2005). Greenwich saw three high profile racist murders of ethnic minority young men by groups of white young men in the early 1990s, including that of Stephen Lawrence, and the resulting research amongst white young people, including those participating in youth activities, found a chronic sense of 'unfairness', the feeling that white young people were the real victims of anti-racist policies that privileged ethnic minority young people and their cultures. Whilst such sentiments are clearly not borne out by statistics on experiences of discrimination and racially motivated crime, they are driven by real, lived experiences which seem, in the eyes of these often socially marginalised white young people, to prioritise non-Christian festivals and traditions in schools, and to be disdainful of the cultures and attitudes of white working class communities. This perspective echoes the lack of confidence in white English/British identities, with many white young people feeling that they do not have an ethnic identity, and being much less likely than Black or dual heritage young people to feel proud of their ethnicity/colour (Nayak, 1999). Within this feeling of unfairness, some white young people feel schools and youth clubs view an assault by a white young person on a non-white person as a 'racist incident', regardless of the motivation, and, hence, more serious than the reverse.

Research with youth workers working with white young people across West Yorkshire in the late 1990s (CRE, 1999; Thomas, 2002) identified that anti-racist approaches were often in tension with the perceived base values and approaches of youth work and informal education. Youth workers understood anti-racism as meaning that they should disapprove of, 'close down', or even ban, 'racist' views and actions, even though the core ethos of youth work is about open dialogue and exploration, and of keeping lines of communication open with young people, no matter what their disposition or background (Smith,1982). White workers in particular also understood anti-racism to be the responsibility of someone else, of (ethnic minority) 'experts'. This lack of youth worker confidence and responsibility can be seen partly as fall-out of the discredited 'Race Awareness Training' approach (Bhavnani, 2001).Such critiques of anti-racist youth work practice have led to professional re-thinks in some areas, and to the emergence of what can be identified as 'cultural/political' educational approaches (Popple, 1997), which in the 1990s showed some tentative echoes of what is now understood as community cohesion.

In such cases, youth work strategies have attempted to learn from the previous shortcomings and limitations of anti-racist strategies, and engage constructively with young people apparently holding 'racist' views, trying to take account of 'white' ethnicities and self-perceptions, as well as the interplay of gender, class, sexuality, and economic experience (Bonnett, 2000; Bhavnani,

2001). The best example, and also a very powerful piece of evidence, came from the Bede House Anti-Racist Detached Youth Work project, an example captured in Stella Dadzie's *Blood, Sweat and Tears* (1997). Based in Bermondsey, south London, the Bede House project was funded by the NYA's Youth Work Development Grants, which were targeted at innovative youth work projects. It enabled the Bede House team to actually focus on and build positive relationships with local white young people with strongly racist views, some of whom were involved in racist violence, or even on the fringes of organised racist groups. Rather than taking the anti-racist 'condemn and ensure conformity' approach, the project was able to make progress through what might be seen as 'traditional' youth work approaches of seeing the young people and their potential as distinct from their currently negative attitudes and behaviour, and also building links with, and understanding of, the local community and its concerns. That then provided a platform where attitudes about 'race' and difference could be openly and robustly examined without any of the young people being judged or sanctioned.

Youth Work and policy implementation

The discussion of the 2001 riots above highlighted evidence from government itself about the negative consequences for community safety and peace of there being an absence of youth work provision, or of that provision being inadequately resourced or configured. That evidence also specifically called for greater national and local investment in youth work in the future, to both avoid further flashpoints, and to build the new policy priorities of community cohesion and integration. The umbrella Local Government Association (2002) offered an explicit and proactive vision of how youth work can and should engage in the new community cohesion agenda: The Youth Service, in accordance with the Government's Transforming Youth Work agenda, can provide the corporate lead for the engagement of young people across the community (LGA, 2002:24).

The LGA went on to offer specific advice to local authority Youth Services on community cohesion, including the suggestion that Youth Services should develop multi-racial staff teams. Such positive LGA encouragement for a strong and high-profile youth work presence within community cohesion strategies was taking the lead from the reports produced in the wake of the 2001 riots. The government's official report said that 'Government must ensure that youth service provision encourages mutual understanding and interaction between children from different communities' (Denham, 2001:28), echoing the call from the Cantle report that 'a well-resourced programme of engaging young people in the decision-making process affecting their communities should be established…We believe that some aspects of youth provision should be considered for a clear statutory role, to a given national standard' (2001:32).

In the years following 2001, community cohesion became a major priority for the Labour government, right across the range of public sector functions, and embedded within the

government's over-arching Race Equality strategy (Home Office, 2005). This prioritisation of 'cohesion', at the same time as government seemed to stop using terms like 'multiculturalism' and 'diversity' and when even senior equality figures blamed multiculturalism for ethnic segregation (Phillips, 2005), was understandably controversial, with some critics suggesting that community cohesion represented a lurch back towards non-negotiable assimiliationism (Back et al, 2002). Elements of the government's discourse around the introduction of this cohesion strategy gave real grounds for such fears, but in the following years there has been remarkably little independent empirical research from anywhere across the public sector about how community cohesion has actually been understood and operationalized nationally. This remains a problematic reality, but the research material that does exist is largely from youth work. Early empirical evidence on this issue (Green and Pinto, 2005) was limited and negative, based on research carried out within the Youth Service of an unidentified local authority in South East England, characterised as facing significant tension around 'race' and territory. Much of the material is actually a generalized and unevidenced critique of community cohesion, but it does highlight some important issues, including limited and vague understandings of community cohesion held by the youth workers surveyed (Green and Pinto, 2005).

No formal training on community cohesion had been given at that point to youth workers, and staff wanted guidance on it. There was an acknowledgement by the area's elected members that existing, ethnically separate provision had a down side of fragmenting the wider community, with youth workers claiming that such fragmentation could be minimized through linking or twinning arrangements between Youth Work provision in different areas. Youth workers also reported that such possibilities were limited by weak and problematic relationships between the Youth Service and voluntary Youth Work agencies (Green and Pinto, 2005). Generic professional concerns around inadequate resources, short-term funding and lack of professional status (Moore, 2005) were also identified as barriers, with the new priority of community cohesion seen as an additional burden for over-stretched and disjointed staff teams. Here, the long-term under-investment in Youth Work capacity can be seen as a serious limitation on its ability to respond to a pressing political priority. Above all, Green and Pinto commented that: 'There is a crucial need to address the lack of empirical research within the practical application of Community Cohesion policies'(Green and Pinto, 2005:58).

From shortly after the 2001 riots, the author has attempted to answer that evidential deficit through youth work-based research around young people's experiences of ethnicity and segregation, as discussed above, and how youth workers and their agencies have responded to the policy challenge of community cohesion. The aim of that research has not just been to provide valuable lessons and insights for youth work practitioners, for instance through the number of dissemination and training events that have been carried out around the research findings with youth organisations, but also to provide insights that can be offered to the wider public sector around what community

cohesion actually looks and feels like on the ground when seriously considered and applied. Much of that detailed learning has previously been chronicled in *Youth & Policy*, with an early, pilot piece of research with young people in two different youth projects, each monocultural, charting the extent of the physical ethnic divide in Oldham as young people saw it (Thomas, 2003). This was followed by a much larger piece of doctoral research that involved in-depth interviews with 32 youth work practitioners from both the statutory and voluntary sectors in Oldham around how they had understood and responded to community cohesion, and what they perceived the results to be. The initial, and very positive, key findings of that research were reported both here (Thomas, 2006) and subsequently to wider academic audiences (Thomas, 2007; 2011). Therefore, it is not my intention to reproduce that detail here, but simply to suggest that this research data highlighted a number of issues. One was that community cohesion practice in Oldham was far from being assimilationism, or the 'death of multiculturalism'. Instead, it was respecting and working with separate identities, and the ethnically or geographically-specific provision that supported those identities. This community cohesion practice was seeking to augment such identities with stronger common identities through focusing on common interests, desires and needs, and through young people getting to know diverse 'others' as individuals. More importantly, in relation to the focus of this article, the research showed youth work organisations at the forefront of driving community cohesion forward, developing it through creative and innovative practice. Innovative, yes, but the youth work approach was actually 'traditional', association and experiential-based work that enabled the creation of safe space whereby young people could not just build dialogue across the ethnic divide, but also enjoy new challenges and opportunities on an individual level. Here, youth work was providing strong evidence of its ability to lead on a major governmental policy priority, and to do so through its traditional approach of open-access, voluntary based associational work, rather than as 'helpers' to formal education or social work.

That positive evidence about the impact of community cohesion-based work with young people was juxtaposed with the more problematic evidence, much of it again from youth work, stemming from the implementation of the government's *Prevent* anti-violent extremism initiative from 2006 onwards, in the evidence submission to the Communities and Local Government Select Committee Inquiry (House of Commons, 2010) highlighted above, and in the associated academic commentary on it (Thomas, 2009; 2012, forthcoming b). That empirical evidence, and that of others (Lowndes and Thorp, 2010), around the operationalization of Prevent, did highlight some positive impact factors stemming from the initiative, and much of it was around youth services using the funding to build stronger relationships with Muslim young people and to initiate positive activities. However, that work, as the national policy direction dictated, was almost entirely monocultural, and so in flat contradiction to the other government priority of community cohesion, as well as showing little focus on the actual drivers of violent extremism. Possibly the most serious criticism of Prevent has been the allegation that it is a large-scale surveillance approach to British Muslim communities. The research process and report from Arun Kundnani (2009) of the Institute of Race Relations that

focused public attention on this issue drew very significantly on youth work practitioners who were actually implementing Prevent and who were prepared to speak on the basis of anonymity. The subsequent Select Committee Inquiry report (House of Commons, 2010) stressed the need both to focus more on cohesion-based approaches and to reduce the role in Prevent of the Police and Security Services, recommendations apparently accepted by the Coalition government's review of Prevent in June 2011 (HMG, 2011).

Conclusion

This article has attempted to provide evidence around youth work's interaction with issues of 'race', racism and ethnic identity to make broader points about the proven impact and benefit of publicly-funded youth work. It has drawn on a significant body of youth work-based research by the author and other academic colleagues to suggest that we already have very significant and positive evidence of youth work's impact in this area alone, something that is replicated by examination of other facets of youth work's past and present engagement with young people and their communities. It has argued in particular, that discussion of impact should not just focus on limited and somewhat mechanistic understandings of impact around what youth workers do with young people and what the immediate and tangible benefit is. That is important, but so is wider discussion of what professional youth work involvements in communities enable policy-makers and other practitioners to know and understand about young people, their lives, and feelings. Drawing on such knowledge can help to avoid very expensive and counter-productive social policy mistakes on both the macro and micro level. Similarly, we have clear evidence, much of it from government itself, of the negative impacts of youth work provision not being present at all, or at least not being adequately configured or resourced for pressing local needs. Similarly, youth work has often been at the sharp end of both community conflicts and marginalisation, being a refuge for marginalised young people, and at the forefront of the implementation of important government policy priorities aimed at young people. That latter experience means that youth work has been the source for nationally-important evidence around key policies such as anti-racist educational initiatives, community cohesion and attempts to prevent violent extremism. Such a holistic and 'joined-up' approach (exactly the sort of perspective that policy-makers have urged youth workers to adopt) to how 'impact' should be understood and considered would therefore recognise the substantial evidence already existing of youth work's positive benefit and, therefore, the grave dangers for long-term social policy of reducing public funding support for such youth work.

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