'Time to listen: the youth worker's experience'

A paper presented by Paula Pope at the 10th Anniversary Keele Counselling Qualitative Research Conference, 'The Creative Researcher', at Keele University, on 7th May 2016.

Listening is a highly prized social activity and fundamental to good practice across many professional occupations. Its importance to one of these occupational groups, professionally qualified youth workers, was noticeable in the research findings that emerged from a recent qualitative study into youth workers' stories of practice. This data was collated through focus groups and interviews with seventeen participants involved in grass roots youth work in the Northwest of England in 2013. Transcripts from the audio recordings created data for thematic analysis in which 'listening' was a recurring theme. Some anonymised extracts of the findings are included here to illustrate the rich and detailed descriptions of practice that arose in the study.

The focus of this paper on listening derives from the premise that attentive listening can be mutually beneficial for both participants for it can increase understanding and provide social support (Thorsheim and Roberts, 1995). These are relevant attributes that apply in this research study. On the one hand, the workers' accounts suggest that listening to young people can enable better appreciation of their concerns and may lead to more appropriate responses to their needs. On the other hand, through listening to these youth workers' narratives, it may increase awareness of youth work skills and values and thereby challenge some popular misconceptions of youth work practice.

The paper begins by discussing the difference that attentive listening can make to building relationships and providing support in young lives. It identifies some of the qualities that characterise person centred listening and their presence in youth workers' descriptions of practice. This is followed by listening to workers' stories of practice, which not only shed light on the nature of youth work but also suggest how present managerial preoccupations with targeting and outcome measures are diminishing the time available for more spontaneous relationship-building that can benefit young people.

From the outset, it was evident that 'listening' was a dominant theme:

> "The core of it is that whole just listening to young people and giving them space and time that other adults in their lives don't give them" (Andy)

> "And then the other thing for me is to sit there and listen because they are fed up of getting spoken to; they just want somebody to listen to how they are feeling, so it's just for me I walk away every time just so lifted thinking I've only given them an hour of my time but look at the smiles on their face walking out, the fact that I have just been able to sit there and listen and not talk over them" (Jade)

Youth workers are paying attention and listening carefully to young people because they know it makes a difference. They are not trying to be counsellors though in fact some youth workers do take up counselling training and this is often person centred counselling because of its similar value base and commitment to creating helping relationships. The workers can identify with its core conditions of acceptance, empathy and genuineness identified by Carl Rogers (1967, 33-34) and seek to bring these qualities into their relational work with young people. The workers described their approach as trying to "be very open and non-judgemental when they [young people] are open with you" (Ed); fostering rapport that leads into a "kind of

empathy" (Carl) and "having congruence with who you are as a person and the job that you do" (Andy). The youth workers also drew on ideas associated with the 'actualising tendency' (Rogers, 1967, 351), which was explained in terms of seeking, "to inspire them or help them be inspired and find their inspiration with their creativity (in) what they are trying to do in life" (Helen).

Listening develops the conversation and builds the relationship in which trust and respect are key components.

> "I think, the whole building relationships, I think it's a case of you've got, you know, you get in with the young people and it gets to a point where the young people, you know, are the ones confiding in you because they can't confide in the policeman, they can't confide in the teacher, can't confide in the mother sometimes" (Peter).

This informal relationship building was not always straightforward because of differing needs and behaviours that might arise. It could be tricky at times, particularly for street based youth workers who were working on young people's territory:

> "Whatever interaction we have with that young person, I know it's because they want that interaction and it could be a negative one but I always think, all this grief you're giving me or my team, you know you must want some sort of a conversation; you must want some sort of interaction because it's your territory; you can go and walk, but you don't you stand there so obviously to me that gives me the green light to say OK, let's work through this and let's go and I think that for the majority of youth workers is the way we work" (Nicola)

The research process provided an opportunity to hear about the serious issues that young people were raising with youth workers. They afforded glimpses of the pressure young people were under to succeed when "expectations are unattainably high", while, meantime, they could be struggling with everyday family or peer relationships. Social media too was contributing to teenager angst with situations where instant messaging could take private matters instantly into a public domain, "you know they could be involving half of Thornville in a message on a phone and it causes a lot of trouble" (Victoria). Consequently, the youth workers found themselves providing emotional support and a safety net for young people who might be in crisis, "to kind of catch it when things are falling apart" (Jason).

This commitment to young people, to listen to them and build supportive relationships, lies at the heart of good youth work practice. It values the voluntary empowering relationship that is "free flowing" and "starts where the young person is at". Youth workers often use activities as a tool to build these relationships with young people. At times, this strategy of building relationships through activities is not well understood by the general public, who see the 'activity' but do not recognise 'the relationship building' that is taking place. The point was made that youth work is about much more than just keeping young people occupied. Instead, as one worker wryly commented, it is to do with:

> "Finding out what makes them tick and giving them a bit of guidance for them to make better informed decisions in their life, that's what we are here for and give them opportunities; give them lots of different opportunities. We are not there to batter them at table tennis all the time" (Ben).

The potential of emancipatory youth work to reach out and have a positive impact on young people on the margins of society has been noticed and its practice appropriated by others with potentially a more conservative agenda of social control. This can lead to youth workers being deployed to tackle anti-social behaviour in some neighbourhoods by targeting specific groups of young people in 'hot spot' areas for a limited period of time. It is a form of practice that sits at odds with youth workers' usual commitment to 'the voluntary empowering relationship' that lies embedded in their young person centred practice.

Increasingly, youth work funding is being directed towards short term interventions that leave little time to sustain meaningful relationships, once the allotted time span for the work has expired. It raises the disheartening prospect of incomplete pieces of youth work practice:

> "So what happens to that group that you have just done that work with, which, yea, you have probably done some great work with, you can see a change, but it's not finished there is it?" (Katherine)

The managerial trend towards associating successful youth work with accrediting young people with measureable outcomes runs counter to the ethos of a flexible youth service that responds to young people's needs. The imposition of a managerial quantitative approach on a traditionally qualitative service appears to be taking its toll:

> "You're supposed to hit your targets and while you're hitting your targets you're thinking … I need to support and help … I love doing that but I know I've got to hit these targets, so I've got to get so many young people accredited so in and out of something but I'm also being told as an outreach worker, be on the streets and target the hot spot areas" (Nicola).

Many other professionals working in the community are able to relate to such dilemmas, as they find themselves caught between their professional value base and the funding constraints of the market place. In recent years, generic funding of youth work has dwindled away (as is the case for many other services in the community) and this has led to the closure of many youth projects and loss of experienced staff. Those who remain usually find themselves in restructured organisations where there is a pressing need to demonstrate professional worth in order to secure service funding.

The difficulties that youth workers face are similar to those facing counsellors, mental health workers and many others in the 'people professions' - how to prove to funders that their practice is making a difference:

> "It's an age old thing isn't it about how can we evaluate what we do? We can evaluate a session but we can't evaluate the impact that's going to have on a young person's life because it might not; it might happen years down the line so that's an age old difficulty" (Jessica).

It appears easier to provide evidence of service value when it is attached to a particular skill or piece of knowledge. It is far harder to point to meaningful changes in a person's attitude or resilience for they may only be realised at a much later date. This has led to some emphasis on anecdotes of good practice as a qualitative means to show that supportive relationships can contribute to self-worth. Gathering accounts of listening practice in different settings generates a data base of lived experiences that shed light on work practices and people's lives today. In this research study, it is placing value on not only those engaged in relationship

building but also on the lives of young people. Ultimately, it is making visible the knowledge that someone is listening and that someone cares.

References

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