

Making Connexions:

“Joined Up” Solutions to Social and Economic Problems Affecting Youth

Rob Strathdee

Abstract

This paper offers a description and a critique of the Connexions strategy in England. Through better coordinating the provision of a suite of youth services, Connexions is designed to reduce the proportion of young people not in education, employment or training. Central to the strategy is the creation of a new breed of youth worker, known as personal advisors. These must ensure that all young people get the support needed, from counsellors and other specialist providers of services to youth, to make successful transitions into adulthood. As Connexions is an evidence-based service, its outcomes are closely monitored. The paper concludes by considering the value of introducing a Connexions type service in New Zealand.

Introduction

This paper offers a description and a critique of recent developments in the provision of services to youth in England. It aims to inform policy-makers and practitioners in New Zealand of developments abroad, and to consider what lessons can be learnt from these. For some time, policy-makers and practitioners in England have been concerned about a range of problems that affect youth, and about how best to address these. In recent years, advances have occurred in the conditions under which young people make the transition into adulthood. For example, on the back of a buoyant labour market, policy-makers have succeeded in reducing the level of youth unemployment, although concerns remain about the quality of some jobs young people enter (Roberts, 2004). However, according to politicians and other commentators, in other areas advances have not been forthcoming. For example, social problems, such as the rate of teenage pregnancy and the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET), remain unacceptably high (Roberts, 2004). Explanations for why these problems continue differ. However, for policy-makers and politicians in England, a key reason for this is that the provision of services to youth has been undermined by an “... absence of clear outcomes, scant recording of achievements and poor methodologies for delivering youth work”

(Department for Education and Employment, 2001, p. 10). In addition, the provision of resources remains uneven, not enough support is reaching those most in need, the training and quality of youth workers is patchy, and the retention and recruitment of staff has proved problematic (Twigg, 2002). Finally, although there are specialist agencies and counsellors who work with young people with particular needs, a lack of coordination between these and a lack of ownership of the problem have increased the risk of young people slipping through the gaps in service provision (Twigg, 2002). In sum, according to the state, the provision of services to youth is seen by policy-makers to have been of poor quality.

To improve the quality of services provided to youth, a new service, known as Connexions, has been developed. The Connexions Service is a so-called joined-up service, aiming to bring together under one organisational structure a range of services provided to youth. Central to Connexions is the appointment of approximately 8000 new youth workers, known as personal advisors (PAs). The role of PAs is to work on a one-to-one basis with all young people, to provide mentoring, to assess their needs, and to ensure they get the services needed to make successful transitions into adulthood. The PAs have ultimate responsibility for ensuring that young people get the help they need by coordinating the delivery and the funding of a diverse range of social services. For example, each young person who is identified by their school as needing support is assigned a PA, who must ensure that they get the specialist support they need. All forms of state-funded support given to a young person identified as in need are routed through an assigned PA. Thus, the development of Connexions has brought about major changes in the way counsellors and other service providers work with young people.

To support this development, the Connexions Service has been buttressed with significant financial support. The combination of increased funding and the creation of a new service has arguably increased the status of counsellors and others who work with young people. After a period in which youth practitioners were seen by policy-makers and politicians as self-interested and as part of the problem affecting youth, this is a welcome change in direction.

In New Zealand, there are similar problems to those experienced in England. For example, New Zealand has a very high teen pregnancy rate (Dickson et al., 2000), a high rate of youth suicide (Ministry of Health, 2004), and a high rate of youth unemployment (Blaiklock et al., 2002). Moreover, research into the experiences of school-based counsellors in New Zealand indicates that there are problems in getting support from some helping agencies, for instance the Special Education Service and Children and Young Persons Service. School-based counsellors report that gaining access to

specialist services is problematic. In some instances this is because these agencies do not see the young people as coming under their jurisdiction (Manthei, 1999). Other problems in school-based counselling identified by Manthei include a lack of financial resources, a lack of community support, and an atmosphere in schools that is often critical and unhelpful.

If Connexions succeeds, it deserves to be closely scrutinised by policy-makers and practitioners in New Zealand as they face the challenge of reducing social exclusion amongst youth. In this respect, one advantage of the Connexions strategy is that it entails a recognition by the state that counsellors and other helping agencies that work with youth are relevant and ought to be supported with additional state funding. However, as is argued later in the article, this financial recognition has drawbacks. The question for policy-makers and practitioners in New Zealand is whether or not a similar service should be developed in this country.

It needs to be acknowledged at the outset that youth work and counselling are distinct professions. Counsellors and youth workers must obtain differing qualifications before commencing practice, because they work in different ways with youth. For example, youth workers may offer training programmes to groups of young people, while counsellors tend to work on a one-to-one basis with individual clients. Counsellors also tend to focus more on exploring in-depth interpersonal issues. Despite these important differences, however, there is an overlap in their services. For example, youth workers use counselling skills when working with young people, and many counsellors also work with young people in groups and design, develop and deliver programmes for youth. This paper refers to youth workers, counsellors and others who work as youth practitioners. Although some readers may argue for a more nuanced analysis, the aim here is to provide a general account of the impact of the Connexions Service.

To address the issues outlined above, the paper first situates the Connexions Service within New Labour's broader thinking. Secondly, a focus on New Labour's vision for youth practitioners is provided. Next, some critical questions about the Connexions strategy are raised. Then the impact of Connexions is examined on the basis of evidence from official evaluations and independent research. The paper concludes by examining what New Zealand can learn from the development of Connexions.

The Third Way and youth practice

The origins and policies of New Labour in the UK and the Labour-led coalition in New Zealand have been widely debated (see Strathdee, 2003; Thrupp, 2001). The basic features of their approaches are noted here as a way of explaining the heritage of

Connexions. A central claim of Third Way thinking is that the neo-liberal policies of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Roger Douglas in New Zealand failed to deliver the promised social and economic rewards. As a result of these policies, economic inequality grew and social problems, for instance youth drug abuse, remained. Third Way governments similarly believe that the old social democratic approaches to administration of the public sector, in which the state simply provided resources to service providers and received little, if any, account of the outcomes produced, is also outmoded. Instead, New Labour and the Labour-led coalition believe a third way can be steered between the market policies of the right and the state interventionist approach of the old left. A central criterion for determining when state intervention is required is whether economic markets have the capacity to solve the problems at hand. Essentially, politicians and their policy-makers must judge whether market strategies, state intervention or some combination of these is the best way to address social and economic problems. Brown (2003, pp. 5–6) writes that New Labour rejects “... the left’s old, often knee-jerk, anti-market sentiment, to assert with confidence that promoting the market economy helps us achieve our goals of a stronger economy and a fairer society”. In some areas of the economy, for instance fiscal policy, Third Way administrations have followed the course steered by their neo-liberal predecessors. In addition, they have followed a neo-liberal course by attacking welfare beneficiaries and by emphasising the importance of obtaining paid employment as a key method of improving social and economic outcomes.

They have also continued utilising neo-liberal methods of funding the provision of services to the public. Of significance here is the use of contractualism, service-level agreements and outcomes-based funding. These are seen as key methods for improving the quality of services provided. For some time, these approaches have been used to provide publicly funded services in areas such as road construction and refuse collection. However, their use in the provision of social-welfare related services is more recent. Although there is variation in the use of outcomes-based funding between programmes operating in different sectors, the underpinning premise is that agencies have agreed levels of service provision and agreed targets to achieve to secure further funding. For example, the New Zealand Youth Training programme requires a set proportion of young people to be placed in employment before further funding is made available to training providers.

Although New Labour has maintained the thrust of previous neo-liberal policies, in some areas they argue that market strategies cannot in themselves deliver the promised social and economic objectives. A good example of an area where state intervention is required is in education and youth services. In these areas, market policies have not

solved social and economic problems, as noted above, nor have they increased educational standards. In addition, neo-liberal policies have failed to create clear pathways for some, from school into the labour market and then into adulthood. For example, neo-liberal policies are premised on the belief that unemployment is a natural outcome of the functioning of markets (Brown & Lauder, 2001). This has increased the work of counsellors who have had to deal with the resulting social problems. According to the Third Way, creating clear pathways into adulthood requires a different kind of state intervention. This does not signal a return to state planning, but rather acknowledges that “what works” should drive policy development. This means that new forms of state intervention can be deployed, in which particular economic and social goals are targeted through a combination of state and market strategies. This has given rise to a new vision for those who work with youth.

A new vision for youth work

A good example of the Third Way approach in England can be found in the area of youth services. New Labour successfully argued that too many young people were slipping through gaps in service provision and not receiving the help they needed to make successful transitions into adulthood. For example, it was felt by policy-makers and politicians that although some service providers were doing a good job with their case-loads, there were too many people that no-one was taking responsibility for (Twigg, 2002). Connexions, and PAs in particular, are an attempt to rectify this through creating a new “front-line” service for all youth. The extent to which Connexions can be seen as a truly new service can be questioned, since many PAs are former careers counsellors and continue to provide careers advice. However, the PAs’ mandate is broader than that of careers advisors, and they must work in schools and in the community with young people to ensure they get the diversity of services needed to make successful transitions. In doing so, the role of PAs is to coordinate the delivery of service or to join up service providers, and PAs are ultimately legally responsible for ensuring that no young person slips through the gaps and misses out on receiving necessary services.

Although the service is promoted as being freely available to all, three levels of need have been identified and clear targets of service provision have been established. The policy documentation states that the majority of young people in level one, approximately 60 percent of young people, ought to make successful transitions into adulthood by accessing advice about career and training options through a new phone- and internet-based service, known as Connexions Direct. Young people in level two, approximately 30 to 40 percent, comprising those “at risk” of underachieving or disengaging from education and training and those with barriers to learning,

for instance learning difficulties or disabilities, are deemed to require more support. This requires more intensive assistance from PAs to ensure that these young people get the support needed from other specialist agencies. Finally, young people in level three, approximately 10 percent, are thought to face severe and complex barriers to participation.

Consistent with the Third Way's support of outcomes-based funding, Connexions has been developed as an evidence-based service. This means that measurable outcomes are closely monitored to ensure value for money. In this respect, PAs are in charge of daily activities; however, their performance is carefully measured against clearly specified targets. There are unique targets for the Connexions Service. While some of these are "cross cutting", or apply to more than one agency, others are agency-specific. Establishing clear targets for the service is deemed necessary in order to measure improvements in performance and to help identify best practice. However, Stephen Twigg (2002), the British Member of Parliament for the Labour Party and Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Schools, has pointed out that reducing the proportion of young people NEET will be the key measure of the effectiveness of Connexions. Thus, by 2006 the Connexions Service will need to prove it is making a quantitative difference in the lives of young people. As noted, the main measure of effectiveness will be the impact of the service on the proportion of young people NEET. Thus, effectiveness is measured narrowly in terms of the proportion of young people in employment, education and training.

While policy-makers have been introducing new sources of encouragement for youth practitioners to adopt practices that reduce the proportion of young people NEET, young people themselves have not been ignored. In this respect, a new allowance, known as the Education Maintenance Allowance, has been introduced. This offers young people financial incentives for remaining in education and obtaining qualifications. In addition, a "Connexions card" has been developed to record the learning, work-based training and voluntary activities undertaken by young people. For example, the card provides a way to record school attendance. Young people receive credit points on their cards for virtuous activities, which can be redeemed for goods advertised and discounts on other products via the Connexions website.

Some critical questions about Connexions

The deployment of new technologies of governance, in which outcomes-based funding is used to better direct the practices of those who work with youth, for instance through Connexions, has been a major source of debate. For some, the introduction of outcomes-based funding and performance targets represents an attack on

the foundations of youth work and counselling. For example, in a critique of the Connexions Service, Smith (2002) argues that the strategy promotes a narrow view of youth work, as merely delivering predetermined state-driven outcomes. Thus, in general, the introduction of performance measures may have a deleterious impact on those working with youth by reducing their ability to develop meaningful and perhaps effective relationships with certain groups of young people. The purpose of the relationship becomes corrupted by externally imposed objectives. Both counselling and youth work have traditionally been concerned with providing assistance to young people that is not conditional on their adopting particular behaviours (Hall, 2003). Counsellors form relationships with their clients in order to help them identify changes they want for themselves, not to impose changes mandated by the state. Indeed, counsellors would argue that if they are perceived as working for an authority, their relationships with their clients will be damaged, if not destroyed. More generally, it is argued that youth work is a much broader concern than simply achieving predetermined outcomes, and its central benefits cannot be easily identified (Smith, 2002). Typically, youth practitioners have begun exploring the needs and interests of young people in the process of developing ongoing relationships with youth. However, under outcomes-based funding this relationship is disrupted by the need to meet state goals. In the new approach, whether or not state goals are congruent with those of young people, youth practitioners face losing their own jobs if they do not produce the purchased outcomes (Strathdee, 2005). Thus, outcomes-based funding is also a technology designed to change the behaviours of those who work with young people.

A further outcome of the new approach is that it leads to the development of new forms of selection in the delivery of services to youth. Indeed, the hardest to help are more likely to miss out on receiving necessary help because the investment required outweighs the returns. Accordingly, youth practitioners are forced to focus on meeting quantitative targets irrespective of the quality of the service they deliver (McDonald, 2002). For example, youth practitioners may be able to demonstrate improvement in the lives of the young people they have helped, but because these outcomes are not recognised in the funding arrangements they remain unrewarded. Some argue that if agencies continue to deliver welfare-related services to youth they must meet the needs of the target population, more or less unconditionally (Smith, 2002). In the alternative, providers limit support and account for expenditure by demonstrating outcomes of service; however, this will exclude some clients from receiving support they need (Short & Mutch, 2001), with those most likely to produce the purchased outcomes getting support. For example, in New Zealand there is evidence of this occurring both in the

programmes for youth deemed as excluded, such as Youth Training, and in general programmes, for instance the Modern Apprenticeship Scheme (Strathdee, 2005). In turn, this has raised questions, particularly within community service organisations, about whether the practice and activities that the state sponsors are consistent with the underlying values of these organisations and the individuals working work within them (Strathdee, 2005).

Evidence of Connexions' impact

The newness of the Connexions strategy means that little research into its impact has been undertaken. However, this situation will improve over time as the agency responsible for the strategy, the Department for Education and Skills, looks closely at its impact. To date, the best source of evidence comes from a National Audit Office (NAO) evaluation (National Audit Office, 2004). The major findings of this evaluation are reported below.

Overall the NAO evaluation reflects very favourably about the impact of the Connexions strategy, which is on course in meeting its objective of reducing the proportion of people aged 16–18 who are NEET. On the back of an encouraging youth labour market, the proportion of young people NEET fell by 8 percent between November 2002 and November 2003 in the first two of the three phases in the service roll-out. After accounting for the newer phase three roll-out, the overall reduction in those NEET is 3 percent. The report suggests that initial inroads were greatest where the proportion of young people recorded as NEET was the highest.

The quality of information about the NEET cohort has also increased as a result of the data-gathering activities of Connexions staff, and much more is known about the size of the problem and the kinds of issues they face. In addition, although the evaluation does not provide any detail, there is some evidence that the focus on participation targets detracts from other valuable work that PAs are doing. In sum, the report concludes that the Connexions strategy has made good progress and looks set to reach its target.

However, there is still a risk that some young people are missing out on support, which is a point that resonates with other research. For example, Britton et al. (2002) argued that Connexions was not able to effectively reach the hardest to help, that there was a tendency for PAs to work with those who were most visible and more easily assisted. Indeed, the report indicates that not all young people can be helped, and that the amount of investment needed for those with multiple barriers to participation may not be worth the returns, as presently defined.

Making Connexions in New Zealand

Although Connexions will need to be carefully examined once it has had time to consolidate, from the initial assessment it is clear that, on the back of a strong youth labour market, it has helped reduce the proportion of young people who are NEET. Of course, any decline in the youth labour market could make achieving targets more difficult. And it is not possible to say with great certainty how much of the decline is due to Connexions and how much to changes in the labour market. Nevertheless, the initial assessment is encouraging, and it is likely that policy-makers and politicians will continue to support the strategy. However, whether or not youth practitioners should support the introduction of a similar service into New Zealand is a more difficult question. On the one hand, the development of Connexions means that there will be a substantial increase in funding for those who work with youth and can improve their lives. It has also led to the creation of a new breed of youth workers who can enhance the work of other youth practitioners. For example, by coordinating the delivery of services, PAs undertake tasks that allow counsellors to better concentrate on their core roles.

On the other hand, access to these resources comes at a cost. Arguably, the introduction of targets to better control the outcomes of state interventions de-professionalises the work of youth practitioners and reduces their autonomy. At the same time, the aims of the young people themselves can easily be marginalised in the pursuit of targets. Through a process of “management by numbers”, outcomes-based funding can also be used to drive down the cost of service provision, while increasing compliance costs and workloads. The view that youth practitioners can provide a solution to problems that originate beyond schools and their communities is also flawed. In this respect, the discourse associated with the Connexions strategy echoes that promoted by the previous neo-conservative administration, in which youth sub-cultures were seen as pathological and in need of treatment to bring them into line. At the heart of the dilemma is that Connexions comes to youth work from a deficit perspective. Accordingly, the aim of intervention is to reproduce existing patterns of power and subordination through treating individuals identified as deficient. Elements in the social structure that give rise to existing power relationships are largely ignored as individuals come to be seen as the source of social problems that are not always of their own making.

Such arguments are problematic for those who work on a daily basis with young people who have pressing social and economic issues. When it comes to helping young people, should practitioners allow them to drop out of education and training or out of employment and go on welfare, for example, if this is the direction the individual

wants to take? Similarly, should young people who have developed damaged learner identities be allowed to leave education and training even though this may reduce a provider's performance as measured through "official" methods? Many youth workers and most counsellors would answer in the affirmative to such questions. The risk in adopting a Connexions-type approach, or indeed any outcomes-based approach, is that advice of this kind creates a tension for providers. That is, do they act in the best interests of the individual in need, or in the short term interests of the state?

Despite the presence of such dilemmas, practitioners should not be afraid to embrace reforms like Connexions, which are based on meeting predetermined targets. One reason for this is that practitioners should be able to demonstrate the benefits of their profession. Indeed, practitioners currently assess client needs throughout the course of their work, and help their clients make judgements about the level of progress made. To be sure, many of the beneficial outcomes of youth practitioners' work are not easily measured and moves to rigidly enforce narrow measurable outcomes, such as those found in the Connexions strategy, should be resisted. However, given the support of outcomes-based funding and the professional responsibility to assess the impact of one's practice, there ought to be room to focus on outcomes. Indeed, the availability of a new organisational structure that better coordinates the delivery of service could greatly improve the work of youth practitioners, such as counsellors, who largely undertake this role unassisted.

One way forward is to embrace an outcomes focus but to remain within the professional ethics that have always guided practice. This means remaining attuned to improvements in the lives of young people that youth practitioners, such as counsellors, have facilitated. Although these are not always easily measured, counsellors, for example, could be more proactive in developing measures that demonstrate the value of their service. When linked to strong professional associations this information would perhaps help convince policy-makers and politicians of the value of counselling and other forms of assistance. There is little reason why those who work with youth could not develop ways of demonstrating their effectiveness, especially if a case is made on the basis of sound theory, practice and research. Thus, outcomes-based funding may be the way forward for counsellors to address some of the issues identified in Manthei (1999). However, to work effectively it requires an open dialogue between all parties, including young people themselves. In sum, it requires a partnership between purchasers, providers and their clients.

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