

Youth Work in the Secure Estate

Kinetic Youth have been specialising in delivering youth work within the secure estate for five years, focussing on the design and delivery of bespoke youth services that fit both the need of the establishments and the needs of young people. Over the five years we have developed some fool proof delivery methodologies that have inspired and invigorated colleagues and young people, making headway in a very dense forest fraught with political red tape, social pressures and financial woes. Yet, five years on, we are proud to claim that, year in and year out, our team of full time JNC qualified professional youth workers, supported by our family of part time youth support workers, peer mentors and volunteers grow, alongside our funding and in turn our outcomes. We focus heavily recording impact (as this is the only way we can assure our commissioners that they are getting value for money) and can evidence monthly the valuable contribution that the youth work service has on the overall community cohesion within the establishment; helping to reduce anxieties, violence and low esteem to name but a few. Yet still, even with robust evidence and statistical data, we are faced with the familiar question...

How can Youth Work possibly be delivered within the secure estate when choice is removed?

Youth work is in essence, the only voluntary relationship that a young person can choose to have. When delivered in an environment that has choice taken from it, surely the 'voluntary' engagement element of the relationship is removed thus rendering the youth work relationship void? A very relevant point but not accurate if you ask me, or my colleagues, who have first hand experience. It is how young people view the relationship that matters. Yes they may be living in an environment where freedom is removed and replaced with clear and decisive rules and regulations, but to build a relationship with a member of staff is still a choice they can carry out, and one that can be supported whole heartedly by a youth work service.

Lets refer to the four cornerstones of youth work, Empowerment, Participation, Education and Equality of Opportunity. Four areas that all good youth work practise can bench mark to, without fear of drifting from our roots. If youth work delivery within the secure estate can evidence effective practise within these four areas, we can surely then claim that yes, youth work can thrive, not just survive, within the secure estate.

The youth service has a major role to play in the design and delivery of an effective **participation** program, that empowers young people to take ownership of their own choices and their own futures, even within the oppressive surroundings in which they find themselves. The youth voice is often at it's strongest when fighting all the odds, a sense of camaraderie and collectiveness develops and drives forward a democratic machine, that can make positive change to a very negative situation. I can evidence first hand, changes to local policy, development of new systems and structures and the eradication of those elements of day to day routine that did not work; all because an effective youth participation strategy has been implemented, through a valued and highly respected youth service with the secure estate. The **empowerment** that is felt through engagement in this area has often sent shock waves through the secure estate, challenging the very core of 'punitive' justice and asking our disciplinarian colleagues to reflect on their own delivery, looking at what they have to date felt was appropriate and effective. If colleagues are supported by structures that allow them to reflect and review, huge changes can occur and a level playing field achieved. This is not

about forgetting the starting point for all participants, after all, the young people are here as a result of displaying some form of unacceptable behaviour; but we have shown that great results will come from an environment of **education** rather than punishment. If we can educate young people to modify their behaviour, develop their skills and enrich their experience while encouraging colleagues to think differently, react appropriately and strive to achieve better outcomes, we will ultimately reach a target of **equality of opportunity** and true active participation.

Within Kinetic Youth we remain confident that youth work is shining the light for true change; using tried and tested methodologies that are adapted to suit the secure estate environment, we have and will continue to ensure that Education, Empowerment, Equality of Opportunity and Participation are at the heart of all delivery and development of the secure estate. The strongest voice is the voice of the collective, the voice of the young people who are caught up in Youth Justice system. All we have to do is listen and respond.

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