



1 THE MAIN THEMES OF THE PAPER

A number of themes run through the paper which raise issues and help pose questions. Some of the themes refer directly to young people, some relate to the societies in which young people live, while a third group is concerned with the processes and outcomes of change. There are processes of transition as young people follow a pathway from childhood to the eventual attainment of adulthood. There are also processes of transformation as societies themselves change and develop in response to national and international forces. All of the themes are inter-related.

ACCESS, POWER, PARTICIPATION AND CULTURE - THE RAW MATERIAL OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES

A key issue in thinking about the position of young people concerns the extent to which they have access to resources which can be used to promote their position and development. Used in this broad sense, resources can mean different things.

- it may mean access to education, employment or social welfare benefits;.
- it may mean the resources which reside in a stable and supportive family structure; or
- it may be resources contained within political processes to which young people do, or do not, have access.

In whatever way they are defined and understood, resources lend advantage and counter disadvantage. They constitute the raw material of people's lives.

A resource can simultaneously promote freedom and impose constraint. Access to the benefits of education will usually involve the

“Power may be thought of as the ability to claim, command and consume resources”

constraint of regular attendance up to a minimum age. Family support will usually involve acceptance of family rules. The resources of politics are constrained within the boundaries of accepted political processes.

A central task is that of identifying the resources to which young people have access and which help define their position and offer potential for development. Alongside this, though, is the need to identify the constraints which accompany these resources, perhaps restraining the opportunity for development or channelling it in one direction rather than another.

Linked closely to resources is the notion of power. Power, in a broad sense, may be thought of as the ability to claim, command and consume resources, which in turn confer advantage on the power holders. A position of power offers enhanced opportunities for successful claims on resources.

The other side of this cycle is, of course, powerlessness and disadvantage. The key to understanding the position of young people is to ask what power do they have to claim resources which they can turn to their advantage? What power do they have to change and develop their own lives?

Answering these questions requires an understanding of the position of young people in the wider society. Power has always had an age dimension, at least in the sense that older groups have always attempted to exert authority over the young and claim resources for themselves. Power, however, is also related to other aspects of the society. Different groups of adults have different levels of access to power, and can claim more or fewer resources accordingly.

Inequalities arising from age exist alongside, and may be overridden by, inequalities arising from other characteristics of society - such as caste, class, gender or race. All of these things create and constitute structures of inequality, of advantage and disadvantage, and all help determine the position of young people.

The discussion of power raises another important theme, which is concerned with the processes of aging and maturation and how these fit into the wider society. The process of growing older is not simply a biological one. From the moment of birth through to eventual death, aging has biological, psychological and social dimensions.

The transition towards and entry into adulthood, which is the most important aspect of the ageing process as far as this paper is concerned, is primarily culturally determined. This is to say that social and cultural conventions primarily govern the process of becoming adult and that biological age is only one aspect of the overall process. If this were not the case, then how could governments, literally

overnight, lower the age of majority and, hence the legal point of recognition of full adult status? Biological aging has little effect on this - the important processes are social ones.

The broader questions which follow from this concern national definitions and understandings of youth. It follows that if the transition to adulthood is primarily culturally determined, then so are definitions of youth, and these will vary significantly between countries and, possibly, within countries.

For any given country we need to ask:

- is there such a thing as youth occupying a period in the life cycle between the dependency of childhood and the independency of full adult status?
- if there is such a stage, how are its boundaries defined?
- how do we recognise it and in what ways do we understand it?

“It may be the case that someone is not fully recognised and understood as adult until they are married; or perhaps had children; passed a driving test and own a car; or pole vaulted across a raging river!”

In attempting to answer these questions a number of different factors may need to be considered. Chronological age may be one marker of youth and, in many societies, will be the most easily recognised. However, there will be others. It may be the case that someone is not fully recognised and understood as adult until they are married; or perhaps had children; passed a driving test and own a car; or pole vaulted across a raging river!

In addition, all of these things will probably apply differently to men and women. For young men, adulthood may mean assuming the dominant role in the family, or gaining land or other productive resources. For women, adulthood may arrive on marriage and having children.

The starting points, the finishing points, and the routes between them will differ enormously. Only by understanding them for particular societies will it be possible to begin to get real insight into the position and lives of young people.

The final issue in this section is concerned with participation and interest. Participation refers to the extent to which young people themselves can take an active role in determining the routes they follow, and the eventual destinations at which they arrive. Participation is about the setting of the agenda for youth and subsequent action to fulfil that agenda.

The degree of participation which young people have will significantly govern the nature of the transition processes which are

followed and the destinations at which they arrive. The questions we ask must be directed towards establishing the extent to which, in any given country, genuine opportunities for participation can be said to exist. Set out in a rather blunt fashion - who decides, and in whose interest? Participation, then, is linked to interest. For part of the rationale underlying the emphasis on the participation of young people concerns a recognition of their interests and their right to pursue them. In the absence of participation by the young, who are the main people involved in these transition processes, and whose interests are taken as paramount - the young peoples', or those of the groups of adults who stand in by proxy?

CLASS, GENDER AND RACE - YOUNG PEOPLE AND SOCIETY

The structure of societies can be understood through the principal social characteristics which create consistent and enduring differences and divisions within the society. While the significance of each of these characteristics will differ, the primary characteristics are generally:

- class;
- gender; and
- race.

To this we need to add an understanding of the extent to which age itself is an important element in creating the social structure and, for some societies, an appreciation of caste and possibly tribe.

Class, gender and race, and to some extent these other characteristics, are bases around which primary social divisions emerge. These divisions create different patterns of opportunity for young people - young men compared with young women, young black people compared with young whites, for example. In effect, these divisions create different starting points and different finishing points in the lives of the young people concerned.

Moreover, they create different routes and different life processes which need to be followed in traversing those routes. The crucial point to grasp is that the structure of the wider society determines the life opportunities of the younger generations within that society. To understand the position of the young people it is necessary to have an understanding of the society as a whole.

TRANSITION AND TRANSFORMATION - GROWING UP IN A CHANGING WORLD

“Much depends on the nature of the transition to be made in the particular society - the starting point, the finishing point and the route.”

The point has been made previously about young people being in a state of transition. For them the transition is one from the dependence of childhood to the relative independence of adulthood. Much depends on the nature of the transition to be made in the particular society - the starting point, the finishing point and the route. To some degree or another the transition which young people are making is a movement towards a more or less developed status of citizen.

The principle of citizenship can be seen in the extent to which civic rights and duties exist, are embedded in the social structure, and are assumed on reaching adulthood. In this sense, the young person is moving outwards from a world dominated by family rules to a world dominated by civic rules.

If citizenship is seen as the creation of sets of rights and duties along political, social and economic lines, then societies can be characterised in relation to the extent to which citizenship exists, the form that it takes, and the directions in which change is progressing.

When seen in this way, the different dimensions of citizenship can be identified and societies and individuals plotted in relation to the extent to which it becomes achieved. In doing this, the society can be characterised, the destinations described, the nature of changes seen and the life trajectories of individuals understood.

The second dimension, that of transformation, is concerned more directly with economic change. It is important to recognise the nature and degree of economic change which is taking place in any society. For many societies the starting point in understanding this involves taking account of the international economic relations of which the society is a part. At the national level these can create significant differences between sectors of a society, particularly where there may be new emergent economic elements and older declining ones.

The important point in this is recognising that these large scale transformations are part of the wider processes by which the destinations for young people become changed - some disappear, new ones emerge. While it adds a huge complexity to the task of understanding the position of young people and the life circumstances surrounding them, it is necessary if effective strategies and policies are to be created.

This leads to the last point to be made in this section. All of this is likely to be wasted if the tests of relevance and application are not continually posed:

- how is what we are discussing relevant to young people?
- how can it be applied in terms of a practical approach to creating youth strategies and policies?

If these questions are lost to sight, then the debate becomes academic and confined to the committee room and debating chamber.