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'Sticking together!' Policy activism from within a UK coal-mining community

Introduction

With the "promised eternity" (Berardi, 2009: 207) of globalised neo-liberalism currently stalled in crisis and 'austerity', the street is more obviously the main theatre of activism than at any time in fifty years. Indeed, activism as a contemporary global and primarily *urban* spectacle is much discussed, often in a manner reprising the language and style of the 1960s. In such hyperbolic times as these, those less dramatic actions that challenge vested power in smaller ways and form the classic repertoire of policy activism can easily be overlooked.

Resisting such a temptation, this article focuses instead on small-scale activist phenomena in a peripheral site some considerable distance removed from the occupied squares of the urban centre, a site that is very much "a place by the side of the road" in Kathleen Stewart's memorable phrase (Stewart, 1996). Drawing on an intergenerational ethnographic study of young people and schooling in a rural post-industrial coal-mining area in England, the discussion presented here considers how those young people's resistance and refusal – commonly derided as pathological hooliganism – can come to speak back to dominant and powerful policy frameworks and thus be conceived of as meaningful policy activism.

By way of developing this discussion, I'll first outline the methodological ambitions of the ethnography I've undertaken over the past six years and quickly detail the fieldwork carried out. I'll then introduce the notion of policy activism that I intend to work with before moving on to sketch out the key strand of UK policy on which I'll focus. Going on to a description of the post-industrial coalfield in which the research is based, I'll also introduce some of the key contributors. Next, at the conceptual fulcrum of the article, I'll attempt a coherent outline of an idea of 'intergenerational affective transmission' – whereby the past is ghosted into the present in ways that impinge on educational experiences – which I've been developing in recent published and unpublished papers. I'll then spend some time looking at how that idea plays out empirically in a specific project that brought young people and practitioners together as "policy actors" (Ball, 2008) in an extended moment of policy activism. Finally, I'll touch on some of the wider implications – positive and negative – of that project. Firstly, though, to the ethnography.

Methodology and fieldwork: An intergenerational ethnography of school resistance

The material referred to here is derived from an educational ethnography carried out between 2006 and 2010 (see Bright, 2011a; 2010b; 2012). Overall, the central research question addressed in that work focuses on the links and disjunctions between school resistance among young people and the insubordinate, 'activist' histories of the communities in which those young people are growing up. Notably, the study is inter-generationally framed, that is, it is a

study of a space occupied by two sets of people – a generation apart in age – brought together in local youth support settings. The two groups in question are made up of young people positioned as socially excluded and living in four former pit villages – Beldover, Coalbrook, Cragwell and Longthorne – in Derbyshire, England, and of adults who work professionally with them and originate in the same working class communities.

Methodologically, the research pursues two inter-related aims. At one level, in “analysing the disputed and contested policy and practice space around young people ‘put at a disadvantage’” it attempts what Smyth (2010) identifies as “critical policy ethnography”. As such, it has an eye to the impact of discourse on the everyday. At a second level, it considers school resistance as mediated by class, gender, ethnicity and social environment (Russell, 2011: 13) but *within a circulation of affect*; a circulation of affect that occurs, moreover, at *a specific historical moment or conjuncture*. From this two-fold perspective, then, the study argues that young people’s resistance to schooling needs to be understood as *situated* in something like an expanded “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1975, 1977) where discursive production of policy, collective transmission of affect and historical particularity of conjuncture are mutually enfolded.

As regards the specific fieldwork carried out, the variety of sites and methods of data collection employed has conformed to the rubric associated with ethnography of education (Walford, 2008). Sites have included out-of-school youth education projects, informal education and youth work venues, youth clubs, a community youth house, private homes, a miners’ welfare club and the street. One particular site, though, has generated most of the data relevant to this particular article: a year-long participant observation of a local authority ‘detached’ mobile youth project, *Bus Stop*, in one of villages, Beldover.

Working with Policy activism

Now, in the introduction to her 1998 collection, Anna Yeatman acknowledges the conceptual separation of *policy* activism from *political* activism as originating in Hecló’s (1978) work but situates her own position as a “long way” (Yeatman, 1998: 5) from Hecló’s focus on the machinations of Washington policy networks. Instead, she proposes a notion of policy activism that takes in “the varied and dispersed forms ...that are implicated in the complex and extensive terrain of public sector work” (ibid.: 6). Her interest is in “a type of activist work that has been relatively unrecognised” and which is “located within an interventionist and democratic state which provides legitimacy and direction for a robust public sector” (ibid.:9). Basically, Yeatman articulates a *normative* definition of policy activism whereby:

...a policy activist [is] anyone who champions in relatively consistent ways a value orientation and pragmatic conception of policy which opens it up to the appropriate participation of all those who are involved in the policy process, all the way from points of policy conception to delivery on the ground. (Yeatman, 1998, 10)

The tactical repertoire of this policy activism – how it is carried out and at what point in the policy process – is, of course, varied. For my purposes here, I’ll work with Yeatman’s definition but include, as Brennan (1998) suggests, “ground level resistance” as a legitimate mode of policy activism. I’ll also focus on just two key points in Yeatman’s seven phase schema representing the relationship between activism and the phases of the policy process (Yeatman, 1998: 11). These are: policy *implementation* and policy *delivery*.

Aspiration: a key policy context

In general, two policy relays have come to dominate the UK ‘youth support’ setting: one concerning a supposed failure of ‘aspiration’ among learners and another aimed at establishing more performative regimes for staff (Ball, 2008). In reality, they interweave and overlap considerably. However, having recently explored the role of performativity in the youth support sector (Bright, 2012), I will focus here on the first of these: aspiration.

In the UK, it is clear that policy on education and training emerging from the Coalition Government (DfE, 2010; DBIS, 2010) has, in all but name, continued the emphasis on raising young people’s ‘aspirations’ that was increasingly discernible during the last decade of the Labour administration’s tenure, a period when aspiration had already become “a key educational policy driver ...at the heart of education policy” (St Clair and Benjamin, 2007: 2).

Since that time, the language used by the Coalition Government has evolved towards a rhetoric of rather more naked ‘ambition’. This terminological shift notwithstanding, discourses of aspiration that imply a deficit model of disadvantaged communities and fail to address fundamental issues of the power relations that create and reinforce disadvantage remain hegemonic (Burke, 2006). It is a policy and media commonplace that those young people unable to find employment at a time of record youth *un*employment are themselves to blame for their predicament. Post-industrial areas like Beldover district, the former centre of Derbyshire’s coal-mining industry, suffer ‘low educational attainments’ and are consequently targeted as prime sites for interventions aimed at ‘raising aspiration’.

A resistant space of ruin.

In many ways, the Beldover district is typical of the residual character of the former British coalfield (see Beatty, et al., 2005; Bennett et al., 2000; Gore et al., 2007; Murray et al., 2005). After twenty years of regeneration initiatives, the impact of rapid de-industrialisation remains evident. A Review of Coalfields Regeneration (CRRB, 2010) presented to the Coalition government as recently as 2010, noted the continuing tendency for such places to be more isolated than non-coalfield areas, have a higher mortality rate than the average for all districts of England, and suffer a double jeopardy whereby the health of older generations is affected by their former work and that of younger people is equally as affected by poor employment opportunities and low expectations. Additionally, the report noted overall deprivation and unemployment greater than the average for all districts of England. Signally, more young people were ‘NEET’ (not in employment, education or training) than the national average.

Coalbrook, Cragwell, Beldover and Longthorne fit squarely within this profile. All saw their pits close within a couple of years of each other in the early 1990s. Longthorne Colliery had closed, with effects lasting into the present, as early as the 1970s. When my research commenced in 2006, wards around the sites of the former pits still exhibited levels of deprivation among the 1% most deprived nationally. Additionally, more than a third of the working age population were ‘inactive’ due to illness, disability or caring responsibilities and more than 50% of the population possessed no qualifications. Basically, levels of deprivation in these *rural* localities matched the very worst urban levels. Not surprisingly, the situation has worsened as the current economic crisis has deepened. According to recent figures, (DCC, 2011) unemployment in Beldover District has shown the highest rate of increase (17%) in Derbyshire, itself a rate of increase very much higher than the national rate (10%). Unemployment among those under the age of 25 has increased at a rate of 24% within a year and now accounts for 38% of all unemployment in the district.

This socio-economic picture also needs to be seen alongside the manifold and contested representations of coal-mining communities in cultural production. In the sociological literature they have been constructed as paradigm cases of working class community in modernity (Dennis *et al* 1956; Bulmer, 1975; Kamanka, 1982). In terms of social and labour history, the dominant historiography has emphasised their subaltern aspect (see the general trade union histories – Page Arnot, 1961, Griffin, 1962, Williams, 1962 – and studies of the 1984-85 strike – Samuel *et al* 1986; Waddington *et al* 1991; Richards, 1996) while a feminist literature has critiqued a narrow proletarian patriarchy locked in a rigid “geography of gender relations” (Massey, 1994, see also Campbell, 1986; Seddon, 1986). In popular culture, they have been situated as sites of “caverns of night” (Thesing, 2000), as places of communist conspiracy, of homeliness and of redemption. They have their own language (Griffiths, 2007), their counter framework of humour (Dubberley, 1993), even their own insubordinate psychology (Douglas, no date). Isolated in rural backwaters, they also have a unique history of international links through strike support networks. Most importantly for our purpose here, they have been described in work informed by memory studies as sites of collective memory characterised by “a very clear sense of the past as struggle [which] constitutes a memory that goes back at least a century” and that has the strikes of 1926, 1972, 1974 and 1984-5 as a “common touchstone” and “the imagery of the strike as defiance of the state [as]... a constant one” (Fentress and Wickham, 1992: 115-116).

Suffice it to say that these ruined Derbyshire ‘model villages’ – the site of some of the worst conflict in the 1984-85 strike (Richards, 1996) – are marked by an insubordinate history that runs back at least to Luddism (Thompson, 1963), that extends beyond the workplace into the community, that has a gendered, do-it yourself, activist character, (Beaton, 1985) and that indirectly affects both the young people and the adult staff who find themselves brought together in the youth support sector locally. Basically, that history tends to shape the young people’s resistance and refusal around a counter-value framework that I have called ‘resistant aspiration’ (Bright, 2011a) – a layered, affective melange of gendered solidarism, radical conservatism and autonomous social improvisation which sustains an ongoing imaginary of local class values. That same resistant aspiration also influences how locally originating staff members respond to policy interventions by maintaining, first and foremost, a culturally rooted ethical bond with the local young people – even in the teeth of increasingly performative expectations. But I’ll come back to that, shortly. Meanwhile, I’ll introduce the personalities around the *Bus Stop* project.

Intergenerational participants

The young people who are supported by the twice weekly, mobile youth project, *Bus Stop* – Cocker, Kandy, Richard, Heartbreaker, Samantha, Beth, Nicki, Ruby, Jimjam and the others – describe themselves as from a place that is “a bit rough”, even the “worst estate in world” (Cocker) but where “[e]veryone just knows everyone” (Nicki) and “stick[s] together” (Heartbreaker). They position themselves as “no angels” and “little rebels” (Samantha); as a “bit of an arsehole, me, Geoff” (Cocker) or, like Beth – who refuses the ‘plastic’ identity of girls who are “in with the teachers” – as “a cunt”. Overall, they canvas “fighting back” against school in general and teachers specifically as representative of a system that is only interested in “wages” (Sophie).

According to the formal categories of the multi-agency services that work with them, they are ‘at risk’ of manifold dangers: becoming teen parents, becoming NEET, being involved in catastrophic drinking and drug use, and ‘offending’. Hence, they are the focus of ‘targeted provision’ such as *Bus Stop*. Not uncommonly, they have been permanently or temporarily

excluded from school, subject to ‘managed moves’ or ‘invited not to attend’. After exclusion, a number have been placed on ASBOs (anti-social behaviour orders) and ABCs (acceptable behaviour contracts) after trouble with the police. All, as teenagers *per se*, are subject to a blanket 9pm curfew that covers the depressed estate of former National Coal Board housing where they live.

As for the staff around this and similar local projects they tend to have a clear genealogy in the local activist culture. Christine, project manager of a Coalbrook based project, *Go 4 it!*, is the granddaughter, daughter and sister of coal miners who had been active in disputes and strikes ‘since 1926’ and she had, herself, played an active role in the movement against pit closures in the 1990s. Ivy, a pension age community activist in Cragwell – whose family was split during the 1984-85 strike, with one son striking and one working – is the daughter of a Ruskin College, Oxford educated National Union of Mineworkers activist. Stacey, more immediately involved with *Bus Stop*, had previously single-handedly set up youth provision in Coalbrook and comes from a pit family whose involvement in the strike had taken them to London where her striking father drove for a film crew. Karen, who had volunteered to support Stacey in the Coalbrook youth project had been on the picket line as a girl and her family’s strike Christmas had been the subject of a BBC documentary. Chris, now a police community support officer, was a striking miner as a young man at Coalbrook pit and had been in violent conflict with the police. Ray, a senior manager in the district, had worked in construction and coal by-products, started “reading a bit of Marx”, was educated initially through trade union distance-learning and was a left-wing Labour councillor prior to taking up his senior position. Among a wider group of participants, Shula had been involved in picketing in 1984-85 as a teenage punk rocker and Bibi, Angela, Sue and Tony – the sessional youth workers covering Beldover, Coalbrook and Cragwell – were all from families that had been involved at various levels during the strike.

Basically, then, almost all of the staff originate from the local working class communities, have links to local activism and have traversed non-traditional, mature student routes into the roles they now occupy. Trade union, community and residential adult education had played a part for most in their ultimately gaining a mixed portfolio of qualifications in youth and community work, adult teaching qualifications, access diplomas and part-time degrees. In my observation, all of them have continued to espouse relationality (Smyth, 2010) as the core of their practice and see a need to act against current policy imperatives that seek to reduce their work to the output-driven instrumentality of a “factory” (See the comments of ‘Christine’ in Bright, 2012). Equally, all of them function relatively consistently as public sector policy activists in Yeatman’s sense, though their responses are interestingly gendered. The women are more inclined to distance themselves from masculinism and emphasise the affective aspects of their labour (Hochschild, 1983): “You’re not working wi’ iron and metal and coal, you’re working with human beings that have got skin and feelings and brains” (Christine) – while the men tend to mobilise a rhetoric of ‘struggle’ as they position resistant aspiration against the dominant aspirational discourse of “resourcing the middle class self” (Skeggs, 2004):

...aspiration is [really] like the old clause four of the Labour Party – to secure by, hand by and by brain etc! So it’s not about getting *money*, it’s about you as an individual, growing and developing as a person. It’s all about being the best person you can be and having a bit of self worth, but living *here* [...] we’re socialists here, so from that perspective something’s got to give, something’s got to change, but from a Marxist perspective you get that tension and conflict and such, so I think that’s what we’re looking at here, so it’s up to me, in my position to get the best outcome for young people and families, and I use it from a socialist perspective [...] The *heart of your role*, is *about* raising aspiration. – Ray, senior manager

So, how does all this come together in practice? In answering that question it's necessary to think about the complex ways in which this local context circumscribes the policy activist space in which these groups of staff and young people relate to each other. To do that, I need to revisit the issue that prompted my research in the first place.

Sedimented affect

The question that drew me into the ethnographic field had initially arisen out of my own experience as a practitioner working in the Derbyshire coalfield with young people permanently excluded from school. Talking to, listening to and observing those young people on a day to day basis, I was struck by the fact that they were almost exclusively from pit families and were, literally, the children of the strike of 1984-85 and its aftermath. Being frequently around them and others who worked with them, one became increasingly aware of how hostilities between individuals and groups seemed to be related to the complex and conflicted history of the communities. Others commonly recognised this too. This account by Ivy, the pensioner activist who independently developed youth provision in Cragwell, is just one example among many:

...at Coalbrook [we had] a Christmas 'do' up at Coalbrook youth club, but they just invited the Cragwell crew[...] so there was just Coalbrook and Cragwell [...] and as soon as my kids walked in there, there was a group of these Coalbrook lads and they started. [...] one of my kids had got a pie in the face, and these Coalbrook lads started throwing the food about [...]and I said to our kids, right that's it, out! We're goin' home! [...] I had all my kids on the pavement outside, and these were coming out and going around and throwing stuff at my kids, coming up behind. I'd got a 12 year old lad who lives across here, and there was a lad of 19 come up from over the fence, come up behind him and he strangled him till the kid passed out. 12 year old and he was 19 [...] And this was kids. This lot didn't know anythin' about the bloody pit. Yeah, you're dad's a scab! Quite a lot of 'em said that to our kids. And I said, hey, some of their dads have never worked at the bloody pit! – Ivy, Community activist, Cragwell

In the local setting, inter-village gang fights apparently reflected the geography of the 1984-85 strike and other local coal industry antipathies running back to the 1930s. Indeed, two of the local secondary schools were placed in special measures, with pupil attitudes to authority being cited as linked to strike related civil unrest in one of the inspection reports (OFSTED, 1999). Some young people in conversation with me certainly talked of teachers as part of a punitive regime of "coppers". At the same time, graffiti in the college where the excluded pupils project was based often pilloried 'scabs', with particular hostility directed against students from Ivy's village, Cragwell, where the majority of the workforce at the local pit had worked during the strike.

The interesting thing, however, was that the youngsters almost without exception seemed – as Ivy notes – not to "know anythin' about the bloody pit" and displayed very little, if any, conscious knowledge of the strike, their own communities' recent history or their family's involvement in it. Colleagues and other practitioners, however, commonly claimed witness to a widespread sullen anger and general malaise rooted in the experience of conflict and rapid de-industrialisation: "... deep down, if they're honest it's back to miners' strike" (Stacey, Youth Worker, Beldover)

Indeed, the data I gathered when once involved in formal research frequently reiterated such narratives. In these accounts the post-strike generation were seen as no longer being in receipt of that orally transmitted collective memory of "struggle" noted by Fentress and Wickham (1992), but only of its affective residue of conflict. Of course, there is a great deal happening in these narratives. Cultural representations of the 'coal-mining community' are, as we have

seen above, profoundly contested and carry very significant affective freight. That said, I think it is possible to work with an extended version of Diane Reay's (2009) notion of 'sedimentation' to think about what is happening here and how it continues to impinge on the ways in which local young people are positioned – and position themselves – in relation to policy discourses such as aspiration.

Hidden in ruins

As my thinking on this matter has developed, I've worked with Reay's argument that "children negotiate schooling not only directly through their own experiences but also through the sedimented experiences of parents or even grandparents" (Reay, 2009: 27) and that education generally takes place in a national context which is a "result of a century of class domination" (ibid.: 24). I've also found her suggestion that young people's responses to marginalisation are "infused with [a] sense of the righteous indignation that once underpinned a strong working class politics" (ibid.: 27) a productive one.

More recently, I've considered how this sedimentation might be affective, collective and somehow ghosted or hidden. Valerie Walkerdine's recent (2010) work has helped throw some light on this matter, specifically in relation to the kind of post-industrial community that is the focus of my own work. Walkerdine has examined the place of affect in community relations and how it relates to trauma in a working-class community following the closure of a steelworks in the South Wales valleys in 2002. Coming out of a psychoanalytic perspective that locates trauma in injury to psychic containment, she has developed the notion of "a containing skin [which] provides a feeling of ontological security for a community beset by uncertainty and insecurity". This skin, she suggests, is created through a range of affective relations and social practices particular to "traditional communities" such as steel or coal-mining communities. In the event of a community trauma such as the closure of a works (or pit), the painstakingly fabricated skin can be jeopardised in such a way as "to cause a *lack of safety and fear of death* (my emphasis) within the inhabitants" (all references in this passage are to Walkerdine, 2010: 93).

Bringing Reay's and Walkerdine's insights together, a picture of a classed and powerfully affective, even *vital*, intergenerational sedimentation process starts to emerge. Working additionally with the notion of the "ruin" evoked in Edensor's recent work in cultural geography (Edensor, 2005) it is possible to mobilise a notion of cultural transmission which is particularly pertinent to post-industrial settings and makes sense of the kind of narratives such as that presented by trainee youth worker Stephanie, herself a child of the 1984-85 strike, when she notes "...a kind of haunting that's going on"

Edensor conjures the industrial ruin as a place where oral modes of remembering are truncated to facilitate "the commercial search for continuity amongst the threads of discontinuity". One consequence of which is that the "spaces of working-class political action [are] eradicated..." (Edensor, 2005: 132) and much remains hidden:

Hidden in ruins are forgotten forms of collectivity and solidarity, lost skills, ways of behaving and feeling, traces of arcane language, and neglected historical and contemporary forms of social enterprise. (Edensor, 2005: 166-167)

In the quest for rehabilitation there is a:

...smoothing over of space [which] involves the erasure or commodification of the past ... and, in so doing, there is a forgetting that things might be otherwise, that elements of the past might have conspired to forge an alternative present. (Edensor, 2005: 141)

Trenchantly, alongside this “not yet” of residual utopic energy (Bloch, 1995) Edensor notes a remnant *excess* of the semiotic in ruins, whereby “...ruins are rampantly haunted by a horde of absent presences, a series of signs of the past that cannot be categorised but [are] intuitively grasped” (ibid.: 152). What is more, ruins are places where stories are “inarticulate but are suffused with affect” (ibid.: 163) a place where “counter-memories can be articulated (ibid.: 164) – but not through conventionally demonstrable knowledge forms:

The knowledge that emerges out of the confrontation with these phantoms is not empiricist, didactic or intellectual but empathetic and sensual, understood at an intuitive and affective level. (Edensor, 2005: 164)

Coalbrook , Cragwell, Beldover and Longthorne are classic spaces of this kind: both absent *and* present ruins. “Smoothed over”, in Edensor’s term, the disappeared ‘pit’ remains as an erased space of ongoing meaning in the middle of a remnant habitation of signs – colliery housing, bath houses, waste tips, abandoned railway lines – that are read bodily as a collective sensual knowledge transmitted at the level of affect and intuition. It is this knowledge, particularly in a context of trauma such as Walkerdine identifies, that I would suggest is sedimented in the experiences of the two intergenerational groups that I’ve studied. It determines the particular character of their relationship, and both energises and limits the range of their activism.

Policy activism in “Sticking together”

I want to look now at the film project initiated and carried out by some of the young people that we’ve already met on the Cavs Estate in Beldover. The film, which aimed to “say summat” about young people being positioned as a “waste o’ space” (Cocker), is called *Sticking Together*. It was made in 2009 and came out of the experience that a couple of the youngsters had earlier had as extras in a locally filmed feature film made by a film company led by an internationally acclaimed radical film director. That film, grittily focussed on lives blighted by negative educational experiences in a post-industrial setting, had used local homes as a location and had the director and ‘star’ actor recruiting local youths for small parts. Cocker had been among a group who responded to a leaflet seeking extras and, according to the director, had shown “enormous natural talent” at audition. Other local young people had also been involved.

Having been inspired by that first experience, the young people in touch with the *Bus Stop* project raised the question of making a film of their own. Recognising the fact that the world seemed interested enough in Beldover to turn up on their doorstep and make a feature film, they wanted to seize the opportunity to say something about themselves and about life as they experienced it:

It’s, like, if *nobody* cared about estate, they woun’t a’ made a million pound film would they? They made film for pit an’ lot. You think to yoursen: a million pound on a film! In Beldover? A lot o’ money, in’t it? - Cocker

Assisted by practitioners, the *Bus Stop* group developed a bid for funding which was secured by the district senior manager, Ray. As a result, a group of young people aged between age 12 and 18 eventually scripted *Sticking Together* from the fabric of their own lives then acted

it over a couple of days with the professional support of the director of the original feature film.

The short film is remarkable. Running for about ten minutes, *Sticking Together* effectively conjures into being – in miniature, as it were – the very ‘community skin’ which Walkerdine’s work describes. The ‘community’, a gaggle of about ten noisy teenagers – one, Roxy, bullied and abused by her alcoholic father – play truant and hang out together, look out for each other. They drink from large bottles of cider ‘up the woods’, swing over a stream, chatter, swear hard, slowly grow up. As the dark tale unfolds, Roxy goes missing after witnessing her dad crashed out drunk again. Hidden away in a derelict farm building she tries to kill herself by swallowing drink and pills. Searching for her, her mates find her before her father does. In a tense scene, two of the older lads confront him. There is a tussle. “Wanker!” they scream at him, “Y’ not gonna hurt ‘er no more!”. The father backs off. In the final scene it is three months later and they’re all hanging out again, heading for the woods, swinging the big plastic bottles. They are still all together, doing the same stuff. Roxy is with them. But when the bottle goes round, she doesn’t take a drink. Instead she smiles. Within this raggle-taggle community she has all she needs, enveloped by the tender skin of a collective membrane strong enough to protect her against the existential peril of being alone.

After completion, the film was used as a centre piece for a district-wide initiative that involved it being shown to all secondary school students with the support of the – at that time – Labour council cabinet member for education. It was also distributed to a number of international film festivals. Both Stacey – who suggested in conversation that the film “was maybe about me, really” – and Ray were instrumental in this piece of activism that successfully reclaimed the discourse of aspiration from its hegemonic form. But it was shaped in activist partnership with the young people, too. As such, it articulates – via the “inarticulate” (Edensor, 2005) language of film – the collective aspiration for that “holding community skin” (Walkerdine) which is the affective legacy of both the adults’ *and* the young people. When I spoke to some of those who had played key roles in *Sticking Together* they animatedly recounted how the experience of being able to speak back to power through the film had “changed” them, causing them, like Heartbreaker, to see things “from another perspective... You’re a different person, I reckon”. Cocker, who had “never done drama, I fuckin’ ‘ated it” wanted to “talk abahit it all day”:

None o’ us kids in this film were angels. To watch it back, it looked like a different person. Y’ thinkin’ to y’sen, I’m *not* mysen. I’m *somebody else* today! As soon as I watched that film I thought: I’m a different person. It’s changed every single one on [us]

Jimjam, Cocker’s sister, recognised the power of this film – being “shown all over world, now” (Heartbreaker) – to potentially change things and in so doing validate the circumstances of her own life:

It *is* showing *all over!* We used to be in a reight big gang. Yeah, it’s changed everybody that were in it because, like, we’re showin’ this film an it’s *showin’*, like, Roxie’s dad’s an alcoholic and *my* dad’s an alcoholic an’ it’s, like, if *my* mum died that’s what could happen to *me!* So, really, it’s changed me.

Working “like mates” with staff during a short, intense residential when the film was being made allowed growth of that trust that Smyth (2010) remarks as characteristic of relationality:

We got a good atmosphere when we were filmin’ cos, like, nobody were *bothered*. They’d not go on a mardy. – Jimjam

In such a setting, these young people were able to develop and use a voice they felt to be their own – “We dint ay [have] scripts cos it din’t sound reight, so we spoked our own mind” (Jimjam). Through the film’s ‘showing’ they felt able to challenge received descriptions of the post-industrial setting in which they live – “It’s a rough area, yeah, it’s a ... well, it in’t *really*” – and to resist their positioning as “idiots” who have no aspirations and in fact know the local economic realities very well:

We’re not idiots. At end o’ day, I know it’s a big world out theer. But I’ll tell y’ summat now, even it’s ‘ard for me lookin’ for a job. Nobody wants anybody.

Through the experience of collectively collaborating with staff in the production of *Sticking Together*, they also recognised the transformatory power of limited individual agency when it is multiplied through collective action and broader allegiance:

“Even if y’ get *one* person out o’ every ‘undred people to do *one* thing it could change their life”. – Cocker

Conclusion

Developed in the 1990s, Yeatman’s work on *policy* activism came out of a conjuncture where the ever harsher style of neo-liberalism was beginning to constrain opportunities for *political* activism. In effect, her contribution opened a more capacious conceptual space in which to think about how public sector activists opposed to the new economics – their backs increasingly against the wall – were using:

...guile and cunning, commitment and passion, imagination and vision, good management skills and a capacity for strategic networking in their pursuit of their own distinctive policy agenda (Yeatman, 1998:3)

Fifteen years later, most of these qualities are visible in the group of staff and young people that I’ve discussed here. In fact, Stacey, Ray, Cocker and the others – tactically audacious, committed and passionate, popping up periodically as both ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, able to focus the group’s ragged ground level resistance – look pretty much like policy activists, but evolved for even harder times. Without doubt, the ‘public’ sector is a less coherent policy domain than it was in the late 1990s – ubiquitous private finance initiatives (PFI) have seen to that. As Ray attests, staff are increasingly forced to work “by stealth” in what is now a much riskier employment culture. Consequently, activism around policy has, of necessity, become more maverick, improvisational; less a matter of strategically pursuing ‘a distinctive policy agenda’ and more about pragmatically seizing opportunities as they arise. Realistically, the kind of ‘hit and run’ intervention achieved by the *Sticking Together* project is probably about the limit of what one might feasibly get away with in the ever more performative culture of the youth support sector. As such, it certainly deserves a dignifying sobriquet. But is it really ‘policy activism’ in any really definitive sense? Well, yes, to all intents and purposes. The project does, after all, collaboratively activate a voice that speaks back against the hegemonic discourse of aspiration from a resistant marginal space (hooks, 1990) where they don’t “ay scripts”. And that in itself is no mean achievement.

From another point of view, however, there is a potential problem in working with a notion of policy activism so broad as to accommodate practice that – irrespective of the rhetoric employed by individual practitioners – remains episodic, un-theorised and essentially non-strategic, as does that of the group around *Sticking Together*. What is more, the notion of

policy activism emerging from Yeatman's work is one that models activist interventions as fundamentally rational. As such, it neglects affect and must inevitably remain blind to the link between the lived experiences of those involved in *Sticking Together* and the painstaking affective fabrication of that community skin that holds the promise of their community's collective past as ghosted tenant of its ruined present. Policy activism misses, that is, the tie between action and 'structure of feeling', potentially leaving activism adrift from its situated affective circuit.

Critical and oppositional pedagogies (Freire, 1974; Giroux, 1983) have always stressed the importance of teacher/learner activists being *conscious* in their role as generators of collective, critical, emancipatory knowledges – a point recently reprised by Smyth (2011). As we've seen, the adventurous, if haphazard, activism of the *Sticking Together* project gets close to this, but more by drawing intuitively on a seam of activism rooted in sedimented affect rather than in any consciously worked-out framework of criticality. In so doing, the project reaches the limit of its critical scope and will probably prove unsustainable in a period of imminent cuts to youth support provision. Potentially, that leaves young people affectively energised but at the same time isolated, disappointed and resentful, stuck out in the rural periphery a long way from any conduit to the urban heart of contemporary activism.

In Beldover – and we need to be very mindful of this – some other, rather differently motivated 'activists' are well aware of the affective remnants slewing around the ruined coalfields and are shrewdly targeting local residents with their emotive right-wing propaganda. In fact, the last time I saw Cocker's sister, Jimjam, she was talking about standing for the estate committee, having been inspired by her experience in *Sticking Together*. Surrounded by an audience of teenage girls in the community house on the Cavs estate in Beldover, she launched into a loud diatribe about "doing summat about state o' village", her speechifying focusing almost exclusively on the xenophobic 'solutions' then being canvassed by the British National Party and directed at the local scapegoat population of migrant Poles.

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