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Thinking Space

Youth Work and the 'Military Ethos'

Janet Batsleer

Given the widespread culture of support for the Armed Forces after their engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan, it may seem difficult to discuss the question of 'military ethos' in schools and also in youth work, which has been placed strongly on the agenda by Michael Gove as Secretary of State for Education. Nevertheless, an open and democratic perspective in youth work implies that we should not accept such matters uncritically: it is necessary that we should raise questions and debate about this, as much as any other social and political matter. The ambition to promote a 'military ethos' is currently presented thus on the DFE website:

Our ambition is for pupils to use the benefits of a military ethos, such as self-discipline and teamwork, to achieve an excellent education which will help them shape their own futures.

Promoting military ethos in schools helps foster confidence, self-discipline and self-esteem whilst developing teamwork and leadership skills. Past experience from both the military and education sector has demonstrated how these core values help pupils to reach their academic potential and become well-rounded and accomplished adults fully prepared for life beyond school.

We are already working to bring military ethos into our education system to help raise standards and tackle issues such as behaviour. This includes:

- *Expansion of the school-based cadets to create around 100 more units by 2015.*
- *Delivering the Troops to Teachers programme, which aims to increase the number of Service Leavers making the transition to teaching.*
- *Promoting alternative provision with a military ethos.*
- *Exploring how academies and Free Schools can use their freedoms to foster a military ethos and raise standards.*

On 14th November 2013 the DfE announced £4.8 million to be spent on 'projects led by ex-armed services personnel to tackle underachievement by disengaged pupils.' We should be concerned that the children with the lowest attainment and with many disadvantages are clearly the target for militarisation and potentially seen as the answer to the Army recruitment crisis.

The DfE is working with key charities and Community Interest Companies (CICs) which are enabling this work, and (as so often currently), the networks here are text book examples of what Stephen Ball has called the 'new heterarchies', linking philanthropy, privatisation and peripheralisation. So, for example, Uppingham School links with the newly constituted Havelock Academy in Grimsby to develop a Combined Cadet Corps, in the tradition of *noblesse oblige* and Public School influence which informed the origins of youth work. The three companies with which the DfE is working, *Challenger Troop*, *SkillForce* and *Commando Joe's*, themselves

also embody, in their governing bodies, the alliances which are driving so much educational and social policy.

Challenger Troop emerged from Kent voluntary youth services and has a strong base in the Cadets. Its partnerships are with the Police and Fire Service, as well as Housing Associations and Forestry. *Skillforce*, based in Failsworth, North Manchester and operating nationally, emerged from the army as part of their contribution to civil society.

The process of moving *Skillforce* out of the Army and establishing its independent governance has been supported by members of the *Skillforce* Board. These Board Members are in many ways representative of 'middle England.' They have associations with many significant national bodies: the Church of England Southwell Minster, the Woodland Trust, and the Racial Justice Committee of the Baptist Union. Others are the charitable representatives of finance companies, J.P. Morgan and Price Waterhouse Cooper.

The last of the triad funded by the DfE, *Commando Joe's*, is an American company who have not even bothered to change their website for the British market (<http://www.commandojoes.co.uk/>). Alongside its offer of products for primary and secondary schools, sports clubs and birthday parties, *Commando Joe's* website is still proudly emblazoned with the logo 'No Child Left Behind', the US policy equivalent of 'Every Child Matters'. With the possible difference that the programmes offered by these organisations may have more emphasis on structure and discipline than much informal education in youth work, they offer much that is important and familiarly claimed as 'outcomes' of youth and community work

processes: confidence, self-discipline, self-esteem, development of team work and leadership skills, inclusion, fun and adventure. What's not to like?

Support for such strategies has come from across the political spectrum and has included Labour's Stephen Twigg as well as David Cameron's one-time favourite 'think tank' *Res Publica*. *Res Publica's* advocacy of 'service schools' is based on a view of the moral degeneracy of poverty-stricken urban areas. 'They [service schools] would challenge the cultural and moral outlook of those currently engulfed by hopelessness and cynicism.' Ex-service personnel can, they argue, 'act as excellent role models for young people' whilst cadet experience brings 'a sense of responsibility and citizenship.' Through the £15 million grant to the charity Skillforce, 'an extra 100 ex-service personnel are already making a valuable contribution as mentors for young people in challenging schools and communities across England.' (Blond and Kaszynska,2012).

Unfortunately, without in any way wishing to question the value of individual supportive relationships formed through such work both for young men and for the ex-servicemen, the general discourse of moral elevation and virtue associated with the military cannot be sustained in the face of evidence concerning the actual mixed experience of military life. The organisation *Forceswatch* gives a full account of and rationale for the critique of the 'military ethos' but, even without taking an outright pacifist stance or even opposing particular military deployments, it should be recognised that the classroom and youth projects are civil society (that is, civilian) spaces and not war zones. Methods of work in each space should properly differ from those associated with military training if we are to retain a sense of education as part of civil society and a space of democracy.

It is sadly also the case that evidence of the higher 'morality' supposedly brought to bear by ex-military personnel can only be put into question by the levels of rape (one a week) and sexual assault reported within the services. High level of violent crime, including domestic assault, as well as homelessness, alcoholism and drug abuse are a matter of record. Dr Deirdre McManus's research (MacManus et al 2013) showed that those who had served in the army were far more likely to commit violent crimes than those who had not, and those who had seen active service in Afghanistan and Iraq were 53% more likely to have committed violent crimes than non-combatants.

It has been argued that the encroachment of the military into civil society is in part related to the changing practice of actual combat and the growth of warfare using drones. The need to redefine a role for the army in this context has emerged also in the period since 9/11 and has been analysed by Vron Ware in 'Military Migrants. Fighting for Your Country.' (Ware,2012). The *Troops into Teaching* Programme (which fast tracks ex-service personnel including non-graduates into teaching) can be understood as at least in part a response to the crisis facing ex-service personnel who lack a role in civilian life.

According to Ware's analysis, in 1998, there was a chronic shortage of troops and only 1% of the British Army came from an ethnic minority. By 2008 the figure was 9% but as Ware demonstrates, two thirds of these joined as Commonwealth citizens and only 1/3 has British passports. The remnants of the British Empire were scoured to find the labour force needed by the army in Afghanistan. Soldiers from Fiji, Nepal, Gambia and Ghana and the Caribbean were to be found in Army literacy classes alongside soldiers from Dewsbury and Sunderland. The rules which enabled

this have been changed (in summer 2013) and now recruits to the Army must have a five year residency in the UK so it remains to be seen how the recently achieved 'ethnic mix' will be sustained.

There has been a significant decline of interest in the army as a career and a crisis in recruitment even in traditional working class recruiting grounds. The 'Community Covenant' through which the Army is developing its role in civil society, including in youth work projects, may be above all understood as a response to the difficulty the Army has experienced in recruitment, as well as being a major contributor to a re-emergent control culture in the inner urban areas. Ware quotes a significant Army General as saying 'If you can't run an Army without migrants, you're in trouble' and the Community Covenant can be read as a response to this trouble. (Vron Ware's ongoing work on this topic is regularly reported on the OpenDemocracy website in her 'Up in Arms' contribution.)

The power of the figure of the 'British Tommy' is ambivalent with a long and complex history. The sense that these soldiers are 'lions led by donkeys' instils the figure with a working-class heroism, whilst occluding the role played by such working-class heroes in the brutal establishment of British Empire. In conditions of postcolonial warfare, in which it is argued that the difference between 'home' and 'abroad' is no longer clear cut, the renegotiation of the presence of the military within civil society is accompanied by a positive appeal to an obligation to 'Help the Heroes' and commit to the Armed Forces in a different way than to other public services. The Community Covenant may not be simply about removing disadvantages which members of the Armed Services may face (and which may contribute to the levels of personal

disintegration after combat cited above). It seems rather to be about giving them priority.

Democratic education, including youth work and informal education, needs a clear response to this network of initiatives concerned with 'military ethos.' This response will include an engagement with ideas of international voluntary service as a completely different practice from military service. 'Service Civile' was introduced in many European countries after the Second World War as a peace-making alternative national military service. We need to emphasise again global connections in our practice and to strengthen emphasis on the disciplines and virtues involved in co-operation. Democratic informal education traditions cherish questioning and critical enquiry, even dissent. And dissent requires character, organisation and discipline, but dissident associations which can offer alternatives to the present denigration and abandonment of young people are not likely to have a 'military ethos.' Militarised culture has many attractions, but these attractions, including adventure, challenge and team-building have long been part of alternative co-operative education traditions too. The Woodcraft Folk movement still uses the outdoors and camping as an important vehicle for learning co-operation and for building the international co-operative movement for summer camps. Saskia Neuberg, a Woodcraft Folk member, has recently started the Military Out of Schools Campaign. Beyond such explicitly affiliated work, the movement of open youth work developed democratic traditions of member participation which have informed many contemporary projects including those based in international exchange and solidarity.

On July 4th, 2013 the Youth and Community work team at MMU supported a Conference organised by the Co-operative College and MMU to discuss Co-operative Education against the Crises. This Conference brought together practitioners and activists from schools, colleges, Universities as well as youth work. Co-operative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality and equity require practices as disciplined in their way as those promoted by the armed services. At the conference we heard from Michael Apple concerning the US 'interrupting the right' movement in Education. Creating such movements here is a priority in order to make it evidently completely untrue that there is no alternative to the 'military ethos' currently receiving cross-Party support. On our agenda must be internationalism, a sense of solidarity across borders and conflict zones, a discussion of the ethics and effects of war, a wider discussion of the meanings of 'public service', heroism, comradeship and self-sacrifice as well as opportunities for education and adventure that are widely available without recourse to military uniforms.

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