Getting to the research question: youth justice policy and intervention

What are the factors that might influence a choice of dissertation topic?

This is an example of the 'journey' of one student from topic interest to dissertation title. At the end of Year 2 Max had a session on dissertation preparation, designed to aid thinking for submission of a title in late October of Year 3. Max had worked previously as a volunteer youth worker and as a mentor for young people with his local Youth Offending Team (YOT). This had given him an interest in youth justice issues and youth policy. His interest had been sparked further by a lecture he had heard that explored the relationship between community and youth policy.

Max made an appointment to see his dissertation supervisor in early October, having done some thinking around the topic over the summer. On the form that was used to inform supervisor allocation he had put youth justice policy as his topic. He came to the meeting with some strong views about the implementation of Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) and their relationship to the stigmatisation of young people as criminals.

What focus should his dissertation take?

His dissertation supervisor helped him to think through his ideas and interest areas, focusing upon how he could extract a question that was feasible to answer with some authority within the scope and constraints of the dissertation. They also discussed how the different methods he might adopt to answer the question could shape the direction of his investigation. An exploration of youth justice policy invariably involves a critique of the competing social and political discourses related to welfare and law and order (care and control) as well as diversionary, rehabilitative and punitive intervention agendas. Max needed to find a topic question that allowed him to find a context for a critique of these ambiguities and complexities. Some of the discussion focused upon whether he:

- Should focus upon broad policy issues or look at one aspect, for example the use of ASBOs.
- Had more interest in the impact of policies on communities, families or individuals or in looking at overarching policy trends.

What methods could he consider?

Max:

- Could use his contacts with the youth offending team to undertake a small piece of empirical work using qualitative methods, interviewing young people on ASBOs and possibly their families. He might be able to access YOT data about profiles of young people on ASBOs and compare the set with national data and/or with data related to the use of other sentencing options.
Could undertake a community profiling activity in an area in which anti-social behaviour is a problem for the local community.

For any kind of study that involves empirical work he needs to consider the ethical and practical implications of his approach before making his decision.

- Max might undertake a literature-based study exploring the data related to implementation of ASBOs and emerging evidence about their effectiveness (unpacking what 'effectiveness' means).
- Might want to focus upon the events and ideas that shaped the development of contemporary youth justice policy.
- Might opt to develop a question based on his original interest in how ASBOs appear to problematise young people, but needs to show that existing policy did not do this anyway.
- Might focus on a/the community to tease out the particular implications of ASBOs and ways in which policy affects or appears to target in a discriminatory way particular groups of young people, for example young men, those in deprived inner city areas, from Black Caribbean backgrounds.

Youth justice policy is a popular and wide academic subject so he has lots of topic choices available and a wide range of literature, policy and practice material to draw upon.

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