

## Re-imagining accountability: storytelling workshops for evaluation in and beyond youth work

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### ABSTRACT

In recent years, investment in youth services has been contingent on the measurement of predefined outcomes as 'proof' of effectiveness. However, this approach to impact measurement has been criticised for distorting practice and reinforcing inequalities. As youth work emerges from a decade of spending cuts, there is an urgent need for new approaches to evaluation. This article argues that such alternatives must be rooted in a participatory and democratic vision of accountability. It grounds this argument in critical reflection on one alternative approach: storytelling workshops, as developed by the activist practitioner group 'In Defence of Youth Work'. It discusses their potential as an inclusive, dialogical method of evaluation that contributes to practice development and moves away from top-down managerial logic. The article concludes by arguing for the re-imagining of accountability in education more broadly, through the use of alternatives such as storytelling alongside a wider democratisation of policy and practice.

### KEYWORDS

Democratic accountability; dialogue; evaluation; impact measurement; narrative; participatory democracy; youth policy; storytelling; young people; youth work

## Introduction

Ten youth workers sit on assorted chairs arranged in a circle, a pool table pushed to the side of the room. Leon has been talking about the young carers club he works with and their request to go camping. He shares how group members planned the meals and raised money for equipment, discusses a conflict in the group that led to someone dropping out, and narrates some of the highs and lows of the camping trip itself. Shirley, who has been making brief notes, gestures gently towards the clock. Leon finishes by sharing that one young woman, who had been quiet and withdrawn throughout the trip, recently asked if they could go camping again next year. Surprised, he responded, 'but I didn't think you enjoyed it!' The young woman shared that she had felt guilty and stressed about being away from home, but that looking back, the weekend was the highlight of her year.

There are smiles around the room. Shirley thanks Leon and addresses the group. 'Our job now is to think of questions that help us to dig deeper into this story. Perhaps we want to unpick Leon's role, and what exactly he did to ensure young people took a genuine role in the planning. Maybe we want to discuss the young people's perspectives in more detail. How did they handle the conflict and what happened to the young person who ended up not coming on the trip? How do we make sense of the impact of this weekend on a young woman who didn't fully participate, but now looks back at it quite differently? Perhaps we might think

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about whether this story is distinctively a “youth work” story, and if so, how? Take a minute to think, and then we will take the first question.’

This article discusses storytelling workshops as a method of evaluation in youth work and other educational settings, as an alternative to top-down measurement-based approaches to accountability. Narrative and storytelling methods have the potential to centre the perspectives of practitioners and young people, enabling them to make sense of and communicate the process and value of education (Allard and Doecke 2017; Parker 2004; Pereira, Pires, and Doecke 2016). This article argues that these methods have a significant potential for evaluation in education, as an alternative and challenge to dominant policy perspectives of accountability based on managerialism, measurement and performativity (Ball 2003). This argument is grounded in a critical review of storytelling workshops, illustrated in the fictional example above, including their potential and limitations as a method of evaluation, and what conditions need to be in place to enable a proliferation of dialogical and participatory alternatives.

In recent decades, there has been a growing policy imperative in youth programmes to measure young people’s outcomes and convert them into ‘value for money’ claims (de St Croix, McGimpsey, and Owens 2020; McMahon 2018). Research in the UK and internationally suggests that accountability systems that are based on the measurement of predefined outcomes can distort practice, undermine social justice, and neglect the grounded experiences and perspectives of practitioners, participants and community members (Lowe 2013; Keevers et al. 2012; Coultas 2020). However, while there is widespread critique of accountability systems based on top-down managerialism predicated on market principles, there are relatively few in-depth discussions of potential alternatives.

This is a particularly pertinent discussion in youth work, the focus of this article, where outcomes-based accountability sits uneasily with a practice that has been described as ‘volatile and voluntary, negotiated through and shaped by young people’s agendas not just the State’s ... a relationship forged from below, not insisted upon from above’ (Taylor and Taylor 2013). Youth work is a practice of informal education in which young people participate by choice, that responds to young people on their own terms, rather than according to ‘labels’ or ‘outcomes’ defined by others. It is influenced by radical democratic education traditions, social education and social pedagogy, and often seeks to contribute to social justice (Batsleer, Thomas and Pohl 2020). However, youth work has been disproportionately affected by programmes of austerity following the 2008 financial crash. This has reduced provision and directed resources away from open youth work (youth clubs, community groups and street-based practice) towards short-term targeted programmes.

Narrative methods can function as both alternative and resistance to monitoring based on outcomes and metrics (Pereira, Pires, and Doecke 2016; Parker 2004). In the European youth work context, narrative approaches have been gaining traction; particularly Transformative Evaluation, in which young people are asked to discuss the ‘most significant change’ they have experienced as a result of their participation in youth work (Cooper 2014; Ord et al. 2018). This article focuses on a method that is complementary to Transformative Evaluation, yet has its own distinct process: storytelling workshops, devised by *In Defence of Youth Work* as part of their campaign to defend youth work as

a critical and emancipatory practice (IDYW 2011). Storytelling workshops were designed to communicate the impact and importance of youth work through a process of collective reflection on practice; the vignette that opens this article illustrates a typical example of the workshop process. While Transformative Evaluation and storytelling workshops differ in their detail, both are collaborative and dialogical, encourage critical reflection, develop practice, inform others about the process and impact of youth work, and resist the simplification of practice and its separation from a wider social context.

The need for in-depth discussion of alternative evaluation processes has been highlighted in the process of a three year study that investigates how evaluation, impact measurement and accountability systems play out in youth work settings, and how they are experienced and perceived by a range of actors: young people, youth workers, managers, and policy influencers (Doherty and de St Croix 2019). Young people and practitioners often experience evaluation and monitoring as oppressive, intrusive, and inauthentic, particularly when it is based on quantitative 'before and after' questionnaires, or attendance and outcomes data logged on spreadsheets. Practitioners and decision-makers frequently tell us that they recognise the challenges identified in the study, and then (quite reasonably) ask for alternatives. As a partial answer to this question, this article critically evaluates storytelling workshops as one approach to evaluation, as part of a wider discussion of how such alternatives are necessary yet not sufficient in challenging dominant top-down systems of accountability in youth work and in education more widely.

My main aim in this article is to argue that accountability must be based on participatory democracy rather than on top-down managerialism, and that this transformation will rely on a proliferation of alternative evaluation methods. This discussion is grounded by a focus on storytelling workshops as a specific approach that has been devised by practitioners from the bottom up, outside of profit systems or institutional constraints. However, claims about the effectiveness of storytelling workshops are provisional; this is partly because I am writing from an insider perspective, as a member of the *In Defence of Youth Work* (IDYW) storytelling facilitators group. This is an unpaid activist commitment that began when I was working full time as a youth worker; I am not the main coordinator of the project, and neither am I uncritical of the method, as will be clear from the discussion below. Nevertheless, my involvement in storytelling workshops and IDYW over the last decade means I cannot write from a disinterested perspective. It is also important to note that storytelling workshops have not been subject to systematic empirical research or evaluation, aside from a substantial process of reflection by facilitators and participants in 2013–2014 that was published as part of a web resource (IDYW 2014). Storytelling workshops, then, are not positioned here as a 'model' method. Instead, the article discusses the potential and challenges of storytelling workshops as one of many practice-based, participatory methods of evaluation, in the context of a wider argument for a move towards democratic and dialogical accountability in education.

The article begins with a critique of dominant top-down approaches to accountability in a neoliberal context, with a focus on the unique challenges this poses to youth and community work, followed by a discussion of alternative democratic conceptualisations of accountability. In this context, the storytelling workshop method is discussed in relation to its potential for evaluation and accountability, as well as its limitations and challenges. This leads to a wider argument for a participatory democratic vision of accountability that creates

the conditions for open, critical educational practice. In conclusion, the article calls for alternative methods such as storytelling workshops as a means of challenge and resistance to mechanisms of domination, as part of a wider re-imagining of accountability in education.

### Neoliberal and democratic accountability

Throughout the education sector, accountability acts as both mechanism and enabler of neoliberal governance and managerialism. It does this by enabling and normalising comparison, competition and control within and between institutions, states and whole areas of educational and social practice. In schools, this is done through testing, league tables and inspections, which create a climate of performativity in which the daily lives of teachers and students are shaped by the pressure to succeed according to an ever-expanding array of indicators by which they are ranked and compared (Ball 2003). Although there are variations in educational accountability systems in different countries, the global context of OECD rankings provides a backdrop of performance-based accountability that it is difficult to escape (Ozga 2020).

The influences of this global policy context are less direct in the youth sector where there is more limited policy intervention both internationally and at the level of nation states. Youth work tends to be provided by a range of governmental and non-governmental organisations with diverse funding sources each with their own accountability mechanisms. In most countries, youth services lack statutory underpinning and are less closely regulated than compulsory education (for example, they are rarely subject to inspections). In this context, the dominant form of accountability in youth work and youth programmes is impact measurement.

### Impact measurement in youth work

Impact measurement is typically based on the results of surveys consisting of 'validated' questions asked of young people before and after an intervention. The results may be compared with a control group to test whether the outcome can be attributed to the intervention. Although impact measurement is fairly new in some youth policy contexts (including the UK) it has a longer history in the USA as well as much of the Global South, where development investment is predicated on the measurement of indicators defined in the Global North by governments, 'experts', international bodies and corporate philanthropy (Merry and Wood 2015; Moeller 2018).

Driven by the logic of a medical model of research, impact measurement poses considerable epistemological, ethical and practical difficulties for youth work practice. Open youth work is not a time-bound intervention with predefined outcomes, but rather a long-term negotiated engagement in which young people participate in different and changing ways for a variety of reasons, in the context of a systematically unequal society. In a youth organisation in Australia, for example, Keevers et al. (2012, 166) discuss how a focus on predefined outcomes failed to recognise the relational aspects of social justice that were central to practice with young people:

... issues arise and, as they are tackled, new challenges in their lives emerge; struggles over social justice continue without cease. Opportunities for change are generated in the

organizing practices that unfold in-the-moment and are always open for re-negotiation ... it makes little sense to fix the result of a process before the process has begun.

Similarly, Coultas (2020) ethnographic study found that local knowledge and experiences in a young women's peer education project in Tanzania were rendered invisible by rigid adherence to donor organisations' monitoring and evaluation procedures. Moeller's (2018) ethnographic research in Brazil and the USA identified intrusive monitoring and evaluation procedures in local programmes that were predicated on the need to prove a corporate investor's theory of change, which was based on colonial tropes of the 'third world girl'. In open youth work settings in England, young people found evaluation based on standardised questionnaires to be repetitive, meaningless, intrusive, and inappropriate to the informal context (Doherty and de St Croix 2019).

In contrast to the deliberate informality of youth work, outcome measurement is characterised by managerialism and imbued with top-down, colonial logic. Rather than engaging with the realities of young people or practitioners on the ground, including a focus on process and 'tacit knowledge' (Polanyi 1967), evaluation 'from above' restricts the terms under which a practice is valued and understood. It renders it legible, comparable and monetisable in a system of finance capital neoliberalism:

The economic value of a reduction in future demand for services and benefits, derived from a correlation of outputs to outcomes, can be compared to the costs of producing that impact. Such a calculation can then be used to justify social investment in a service on the basis of a projected 'cashable return' to the state. (McGimpsey 2018, 233).

Impact measurement and 'social value' calculations, while they may be defended on the grounds of social justice such as a desire to equalise outcomes for disadvantaged groups, are enablers of finance capital neoliberalism. As well as creating the conditions for market-based ranking and 'social value' claims, metrics-based accountability produces new opportunities for profit through the provision and management of the data systems 'needed' to produce and record results. This has clear ramifications for community-based services because impact measurement is easier to implement in time-limited projects with predefined outcomes than it is in open-ended grassroots provision (de St Croix 2018). It also has implications for evaluation methodology, because it requires the collection of data from young people through standardised measures, thus favouring a focus on numbers and restricting the potential for alternative methods.

### *Democratic possibility*

In her analysis of the politics of accountability in education, Ozga (2020) argues that accountability in its current form erodes and suppresses democratic possibility. Technical-managerial accountability measures construct the policy process as scientific and rational, thus inhibiting contestation and dissent:

In this perspective on policy, there is the assumption of a linked, but distinct, sequence of events, a linear process, through which policy is made: from analysis of the problem and reviewing responses, to selection of the best, evidence-based approach, to implementation of the chosen course of action, and finally, evaluation of its success, with the intention of further improvement based on lessons learned. These are approaches that exclude politics,

and that limit policy to the formal mechanisms of government and official political actors. (Ozga 2020, 20)

This is mirrored at the level of global governance, where Merry (2011) argues that a reliance on statistical indicators, derived from corporate and colonial logic, tends to replace political debate with technical expertise.

In contrast, democratic accountability centres the participation of those who are most affected by decisions. In youth work, for example, democratic evaluation and monitoring values the expertise of young people, practitioners, family and community, rather than the political or pragmatic interests of resource holders. This creates space both for political contestation, and for a proliferation of inclusive, participatory forms of evaluation.

The word 'democratic' requires clarification here because of its dominant association with representative systems in which citizens participate only through elections and lobbying, both of which favour those with money and status – resources heavily shaped by intersections of class, race, gender, dis/ability and sexuality – and exclude those not 'counted' as voters (including children, young people, migrants and prisoners). An alternative view of democracy challenges hierarchical power relations and advocates systems in which everyone has a real say over the conditions in which they live their lives. This is sometimes known as participatory democracy, and is informed by anti-racist, feminist, anarchist, and anti-authoritarian socialist movements. In participatory democracy, people – particularly those from poor and marginalised groups – are actively involved in democratic structures that make participation possible. This requires structural change to provide opportunities for people's meaningful involvement in decisions that affect their everyday lives as well as wider political systems (Pateman 2012).

Understandings of participatory democracy have been substantially informed by the visionary work of activists such as Ella Baker, an African American activist in the civil rights movement who was critical of hierarchical methods of organising that relied on charismatic leaders and failed to recognise the work and potential of women. Instead, Baker advocated for the grassroots involvement of people throughout society to take part in decisions and actions that directly affected their lives while simultaneously setting up structures such as adult education to support this (Elliott 1996). Baker's vision for the future was inseparable from principles of organising in the present; this is sometimes known as prefigurative politics. Participatory democracy relies on political contestation and struggle, as well as the embedding of participatory practices in everyday life.

Accountability based on the logic of participatory democracy, then, must enable and encourage thinking beyond currently taken-for-granted realities, change everyday experience, and prepare the ground for transformation. Such thinking is most often and productively developed from the bottom up: from grassroots communities, practitioners and activists. In schooling, for example, trade unions have proposed replacing top-down inspections with peer visits in which teachers hold each other to account, with advisors who can be called in where schools need support or where there are serious concerns (Hutchings 2015). In higher education, feminists have devised participatory approaches to evaluating women's studies programmes in which evaluators use a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods from the perspective of a 'non-neutral observer' who is committed to, and knowledgeable about, the practice (Shapiro 1988). In youth work,

practitioner-activists have developed storytelling workshops (discussed in detail below) to discuss and communicate the impact of youth work in all its complexity.

While quantitative data can play a role in democratic accountability – for example, in identifying which groups are using services and who is excluded – stories have considerable potential to contribute meaningfully to evaluation in education settings. Narratives have long been used in liberatory activism, practice and research as a powerful challenge to top-down knowledge production (Dillard 2000). Parker (2004) advocates for narrative evaluation informed by Critical Race Theory as a way of centring minority views:

... minority groups that are the subjects of the evaluation have to be full participants in the process so evaluators can gain insights from the subjects' perspectives. Conscious subjectivity should be encouraged in the field of evaluation to allow for different points of view in the evaluation process ... Here, the evaluator and the participants can better examine and expose the intended and unintended consequences and benefits of the programs.

Pereira, Pires, and Doecke (2016, 547), writing in relation to a teachers' storytelling project, emphasise the relational and contextual aspects of storytelling:

A story never simply presents information about the world ... but always embodies a relationship between the narrator and the world represented. It is thus that it locates itself within a practical, social space where people, in the pursuit of their interests, always need to negotiate with others in order to get things done.

Yet the widespread use of narratives in accountability is difficult to imagine in the current political and social context, because they contrast with the dominant policy discourse of evaluation as scientific, factual, and value-free (Duffy 2017). According to this logic, stories may be dismissed as unverifiable and subjective, or at best identified as illustrative or supplementary to 'objective' metric data. Despite narrative research being a respected method of gathering meaningful data in the social sciences and humanities, it is less widely recognised in policy and practice evaluation. This means that stories may be told as part of everyday conversation in youth projects but are rarely elicited for the purpose of accountability; alternatively, they are used without ethical reflexivity, as case studies in reports or fundraising materials that reproduce deficit tropes such as 'If it wasn't for [youth project] I would be in jail or in a coffin' (Baldrige 2019, 39). In order to envision accountability based on participatory democratic principles, it is essential to engage in critical reflection on the potential of alternative evaluation approaches that have been developed by practitioners and activists 'from below'. The following discussion of one such method – storytelling in youth work – provides a basis for broader conclusions on the potential and limitations of narrative methods, and the conditions under which democratic evaluation techniques can thrive.

### Storytelling workshops: a critical review

The storytelling workshops that are the focus of this article were developed by the campaign *In Defence of Youth Work* (IDYW), launched in England in 2009 to challenge the co-option of youth work by the market and neoliberal state, and a move towards 'the very antithesis of the Youth Work process: predictable and prescribed outcomes' (IDYW 2009). The following year, the Coalition Government (2010–15) initiated a programme of austerity that led to devastating youth service cuts; in this context, IDYW became

a reference point for youth workers and young people who opposed cuts to youth services, and supported the critical and democratic practice of youth work as ‘an association and conversation without guarantees’ (IDYW 2009).

For IDYW, then, it was vital to communicate the *value* of youth work as part of a campaign to defend this practice, while avoiding deficit discourses that position youth work as ‘preventing crime’, ‘reducing teen pregnancy’, ‘saving money on prison spaces’ or ‘keeping kids off the streets’. Such claims, as well as being poorly evidenced, are highly problematic because they reproduce classist, racialised and gendered assumptions about the young people participating in youth services. They are inaccurate and reductive, producing a narrative that obscures the myriad ways in which youth work contributes to young people’s everyday lives and communities.

At IDYW’s first conference in 2010, youth worker and historian Bernard Davies called for young people and youth workers to contribute stories from their experience: narratives to represent the qualitative impact of youth work on young people’s lives, which IDYW could then share as part of its campaign for critical, open youth work. As a way of generating such stories, Davies and others devised a format for ‘storytelling workshops’. The workshops drew on philosophical practices of ‘Socratic dialogue’ as developed in community development contexts (Banks 2013). Stories emerging from the initial call-out and workshops were compiled as a book and short film, *This is Youth Work: Stories from Practice* (IDYW (In Defence of Youth Work) 2011), funded and supported by trade unions Unison and Unite, sent to policy makers, and launched at the Houses of Parliament.

Following the publication of ‘This is Youth Work’, further organisations came forward to host storytelling workshops in the UK and beyond, including local government youth services, voluntary sector organisations, and professional training providers. The workshops invited youth workers and/or young people to identify and critically discuss stories from their experience. They have been used in various contexts, including organisational development; staff reflection and training; service evaluation; monitoring in local authority youth services; awareness raising amongst local councillors and other agencies; resistance to cuts; and face-to-face work with young people and volunteers (IDYW 2014). By the end of 2019, 58 workshops had been carried out with approximately 1,400 participants (IDYW 2020). Although the project is based primarily in England, workshops have been carried out in nine countries, and particularly close partnerships developed in Ireland and Japan. An open access resource was published online to enable practitioners to run the workshops, including workshop templates, handouts and a series of reflective articles by facilitators and participants (IDYW 2014). While the workshops are designed to be adaptable and flexible, a typical structure is outlined here.

### **Workshop outline**

Workshops typically work best with around ten participants (youth workers, young people or others directly involved in youth work), one or two facilitators, and lasting two to three hours. Some workshops have involved substantially higher numbers; if possible, the workshop would then split into smaller groups, each with a facilitator. There are five stages:

**Selecting the story:** After participants have introduced themselves, the facilitator invites them to contribute a story from their own experience, in answer to a specific



task such as, 'Describe an example of your work that represents you practising as a youth worker'. Participants are guided to share a story taken from their own direct experience, that has come to a (provisional) end, and that is not likely to be unduly upsetting for themselves or other participants – they must feel comfortable to share their story in detail and be questioned on it. It is not necessary for every participant to contribute a story. After some thinking time, the facilitator invites participants to share a 'headline' and a very brief account of their story. The group then discusses which stories might enable a productive conversation and one is selected by the group through consensus or vote.

**Telling the story:** The participant whose story is selected tells their story in detail for around ten minutes without interruption, avoiding the use of real names or identifying details. The group is asked to maintain confidentiality. The facilitator may invite questions of clarification.

**Questioning:** The facilitator initiates a process of questioning that aims to assist the storyteller and the group in unpicking the story and making explicit 'taken for granted' elements – such as (for example) what enabled a practitioner to make initial contact with the young person or group, or how decisions were negotiated between young people and workers. This section of the workshop is perhaps the most important and requires skilful facilitation. The facilitator models and elicits questions that aim to deepen collective understanding, without judging the storyteller. At this point there is usually a break. There may be an opportunity for a second participant to tell their story through the same process.

**Contextualising:** In this section, participants discuss the story or stories in a wider professional and political context, perhaps beginning with a discussion on how far the story demonstrated critical youth work practice and the relevant enablers and constraints. Participants may reflect, for example, on short-term funding, high staff turnover, or issues in the community. This may be followed by a discussion on how youth work might be sustained and defended in the current context. If using storytelling for organisational evaluation or monitoring, the group might discuss how the story links with or challenges funding objectives, the shared values of the organisation, or the principles of youth work; however, this must always be a critical discussion, where the story and dialogue challenge and develop (rather than simply reinforce or legitimise) organisational aims and practices.

**Closing:** The workshop finishes with thinking or writing time and a spoken reflection from each participant, perhaps sharing one thing they will take away from the process. Following the workshop, facilitators and hosts encourage and support any participants who want to write their story for organisational purposes or for publication. However, in many cases the emphasis is on the intrinsic value of the *process* of storytelling for professional development and critical reflection, and it is not always necessary for the story to be written up.

### ***Storytelling workshops as evaluation***

Although initially designed for campaigning and practice development rather than for accountability purposes, storytelling workshops have the potential to provide practitioners and organisations with space to evaluate their practice beyond the use of tick box mechanisms and predefined outcomes. By focusing, not on decontextualised 'outcomes' but on the *process* of informal education – including, for example, the role of

practitioners and peers, the local or organisational context, and what enabled the work to have impact and value for young people and communities – the intention is that youth workers and others develop a deeper understanding of practice through collective analysis and dialogue. Storytelling workshops also enable participants to unpick ‘tacit knowledge’ about aspects of youth work’s impact that are often difficult to explain – for example, the value in young people’s lives of informal spaces, equitable relationships with adults, and enjoyable experiences – and communicate this impact without resorting to deficit tropes. For these reasons, local authority and voluntary sector youth organisations have used storytelling workshops to explore and communicate the realities and impact of practice as part of their accountability processes.

In a local authority youth service, storytelling was implemented alongside council mandated numerical targets to enable and require youth workers to articulate the value and process of their work. Beginning with a programme of IDYW workshops across the entire youth service, the local authority used storytelling to enhance and enrich the outcomes-based data that projects were already required to submit to senior officers. Youth workers were supported to write a story from practice every three months. This provided senior managers with what one described as ‘strong anecdotal evidence [of] the difference that we have made in young people’s lives’, while youth workers reported becoming better able to articulate the value of youth work in the political context ‘of the youth service having to increasingly justify its existence, so rather than just presenting figures we could actually say that we were having an impact’.<sup>1</sup>

In a voluntary sector youth organisation, IDYW storytelling workshops were used to evaluate and report back to funders on a five-year project (Hogan and Marsden 2014). Peer educators from the project took part in IDYW storytelling workshops in which they told their own stories of practice and developed confidence as facilitators. These young people then facilitated group discussions in which their peers told stories of their experiences in the project. The stories were written up as part of a report to funders, alongside the project coordinator’s own narratives of significant milestones in the project.

In these and other examples, spoken and written reflections by youth workers and managers recorded on the IDYW (2014) web resource suggest that storytelling workshops have considerable potential for service evaluation and accountability. They contribute to quality of practice and collective personal development amongst practitioners. They produce rich qualitative evidence that gives managers, local policy makers and funding agencies a grounded understanding of youth work and its results. These stories are qualitatively different from polished ‘case studies’; they acknowledge and focus attention on the up and down, back -and-forth nature of practice – the ‘real life’ conditions under which impact can occur. Because they are generated at the level of young people and those working directly with them (rather than by managers and fundraisers), they enable a focus on young people’s and practitioners’ grounded experiences and what they value about youth work, as discussed by a facilitator reflecting on storytelling workshops with young volunteers:

The nature of youth work practice as ‘improvisatory yet rehearsed’ had particular resonance as well as the exploration of young people’s choice and autonomy to choose to engage, not just with activities but conversations and relationships, and to have a level of power in setting the boundaries, locations and potential of these. (Connaughton 2014).

While storytelling workshops have clear potential in relation to democratic accountability, it is essential to avoid a romanticised view of how any particular method may be utilised in practice; thus I will now turn to some key tensions and challenges that might occur when storytelling workshops are used in evaluation and accountability.

### *Tensions and challenges*

Evaluation is situated within a specific political and economic context; no tool or technique, whatever its origins, is inherently democratic, inclusive and congruent with social justice. In this section I outline three challenges in using storytelling workshops for evaluation: resisting deficit narratives; avoiding top-down implementation; and providing time, space and support for reflection. These challenges are intensified, of course, by the way in which social, educational and organisational practice is shaped by neoliberal logics. This is not only a matter for storytelling workshops but restricts the development and implementation of narrative methods and other bottom-up evaluation in general, as will be discussed later.

Storytelling is rightly seen as having the potential to challenge dominant knowledge systems and epistemological frameworks, by valuing the narratives of those who are 'experts through experience' (Dillard 2000). Yet stories are not inherently anti-oppressive and inclusive; both the process of inviting and discussing stories, and any communication of these stories, must be sensitive, ethical, and attentive to power and inequalities. Storytelling workshops have the potential to challenge deficit-based or intrusive evaluation methods, partly through their deliberative nature which engenders an element of 'peer accountability', but this potential requires an understanding and critique of the way in which stories can reinforce negative tropes.

It is important to recognise that the dominant use of narratives by youth organisations is not always positive; this inevitably shapes what might arise when practitioners and young people are asked to tell stories from their experience. Young people from groups that are positioned as marginal in society are repeatedly asked by professionals to narrate 'their story', often for it to be disbelieved or distorted. If youth workers are asked to tell stories, this is generally in the form of 'case studies' or individual 'success stories' that are reproduced by youth organisations in brochures, websites, promotional videos, monitoring reports and grant proposals. Too often, these reproduce damaging racialised and classist narratives, as argued by Baldrige (2019, 39) in her ethnography of a community-based youth project in the USA:

The framing of Black and Latinx youth as deficient and worthy of saving by after-school spaces and well-meaning white liberals is a phenomenon that perpetrates the belief in white saviors and white goodness and further designates Black youth and other minoritized youths as problems to be fixed or as threats to be destroyed.

Such stereotypical stories are reproduced in the media, and when young people are 'asked to "perform" for donors by sharing their stories of struggle and subsequent triumph because they were "saved" by a program' (Baldrige 2018). A good storytelling workshop would challenge deficit and saviour narratives; but this requires skilful facilitation and questioning by peers. There is a clear need to foreground and discuss political and economic issues; this is why, in the workshop structure outlined above, the final stage involves situating the story in its wider context.

Secondly, there is a tension where storytelling workshops are inserted within an existing hierarchical accountability framework. Although managerial accountability is commonly associated with metrics, storytelling is not immune from becoming a top-down mechanism. This can be seen for example in the attempt in England by the New Labour government (1997–2010) to include qualitative accounts of young people's progress within a broader system of target-based accountability. The intention was for youth workers to record changes arising from young people's involvement in a youth project. In practice, however, these 'recorded outcomes' were subsumed within an imposed system of accountability in which targets were widely seen as unachievable, the 'tracking' of young people was experienced as surveillance, and the recordings themselves were seen by workers as meaningless, unethical, burdensome and distorting of practice (de St Croix 2016). This experience demonstrates how narrative methods can be incorporated within managerial accountability systems, with their associated problems of bureaucracy, incoherence and inauthenticity.

Thirdly, alternative methods such as storytelling workshops are potentially constrained by factors that affect evaluation more broadly: inadequate time, space, and support. Few resources are needed to run a storytelling workshop: a group of participants, a suitable space or room, and a skilled facilitator. IDYW facilitators work as volunteers, asking only for travel expenses and an optional donation to IDYW's running costs; alternatively, groups can use the free web resource and organise their own workshops. Nevertheless, where there is a legacy of cuts, redundancies, closed courses, sold off buildings and depleted trust amongst practitioners and community members, this produces real constraints in terms of the time, energy and confidence needed for in-depth evaluation of any kind. Storytelling workshops are relatively time efficient because they produce evidence while also developing and improving practice; however, they may be seen as a risky approach. Democratic accountability requires time for deliberation, dialogue, creativity and experimentation; it is not (and should not become) narrowly focused on the production of results. Thus, practitioners and managers who have experienced years of top-down metric-based systems may need support to develop their practice as storytellers, deliberators, and facilitators, and to explain to funders and policy makers why stories are a valid form of evidence.<sup>2</sup>

### *Storytelling in and beyond youth work*

Where there is an awareness of the challenges and tangible action is taken to address them, storytelling workshops have the potential to contribute to the democratising of accountability. While this method has emerged in a youth work context, it has potential in other educational settings too. In schools, for example, they could provide an environment for students, teachers, mentors and learning assistants to unpick the impact of education beyond test results, think about what practices and resources enable this wider impact, and share these stories to communicate the holistic impact of schools in their communities.

Like any other evaluation method, storytelling is situated in a social, political and economic context. Used in a critical, questioning and reflective way, storytelling workshops embody a challenge to neoliberal and managerial accountability. They are a non-entrepreneurial, unpackaged mode of evaluation that requires active engagement rather

than implementation or consumption; the resources are freely available and nobody profits from their use. The workshop element situates stories within a process that relies on *relationship* and *dialogue* – elements that are understood as central to the process of youth work, and are also vital (yet under explored) in schools, colleges, and universities.

A narrative form is often associated with a beginning, middle and end, perhaps suggesting too neat a fairy tale – the workshop process is designed to prevent a story from becoming comfortable or linear. This mirrors an approach to youth work in which practice is ‘improvisatory yet rehearsed’ (IDYW 2009), where chaos is not an accident but rather a key element of the process (Brent 2018). Yet this view of evaluation, and of practice, challenges a system in which outcomes are predicted, impact must be measured, and ‘results’ are the only thing that counts. These challenges are – if anything – even more present in other education settings such as schools. To enable methods such as storytelling to be used more widely, it is important to situate them within a wider political context, asking what conditions would enable the proliferation of practice that centres democracy, inclusion and human relationships.

### Discussion: creating the conditions

Alternative approaches to evaluation such as storytelling workshops can be seen as a form of prefigurative practice, embodying the change we want to see in the world, both in youth work and in the wider education sector. Yet these alternatives will be most effective as part of a wider transformation in conceptions of accountability at all levels – institutional, governmental, professional and societal. As discussed earlier, accountability is currently positioned within a neoliberal logic of finance capital, in which outcomes are predefined, measured, compared and converted into ‘value for money’ claims. As long as this model is dominant, alternative methods such as storytelling workshops risk being viewed as supplementary to metrics-based systems, or becoming co-opted into top-down managerial practice as a new form of performance appraisal.

While narrative forms of evaluation may tend to be more participatory and inclusive than metrics systems, if they are implemented prescriptively from above they will often be experienced as an imposition that neglects the realities of practice and become a burden on educational relationships. In other words, the tool cannot be democratic if the conditions surrounding it are not also democratic. Thus, my argument is that educational practice needs new methods of evaluation and monitoring, but that we also need radically different conditions from those that currently exist.

What conditions would enable a participatory and democratic approach to accountability, in which alternative and bottom-up methods such as storytelling workshops could contribute to high quality practice, evidence and evaluation? Here we might usefully draw on arguments for ‘intelligent’ forms of accountability in relation to professionals. Writing about teachers, Gewirtz and Cribb (2020, 228) argue that,

Instead of concentrating on the respects in which teachers are accountable for their professionalism to employing organizations we should also, or even primarily, be asking how organizations are accountable for creating the conditions for teacher professionalism.

In this vision, accountability would be turned on its head; organisations would be required to demonstrate the degree to which their goals and infrastructural arrangements enable

professionals to apply and develop their expertise and experience, to exercise their discretion, and to remain dedicated to their values (Vriens, Vosselman, and Groß 2016). Thinking about this idea of ‘accounting for conditions’ in the youth work context, we might suggest that decision makers and budget holders – including local and national government, charitable foundations, donors and philanthropists – have a responsibility to demonstrate how they enable and support youth organisations to have a positive impact on young people and communities:

Accounting for conditions ... amounts to giving a judgment about whether goals and infrastructural arrangements enable/do not hinder professional work. (Vriens, Vosselman, and Groß 2016, 1187)

To transform their approach, decision makers and resource holders in youth work and education more widely might ask themselves questions such as:

- Do we understand the work done by these organisations and these practitioners? Do we build meaningful relationships with the recipients of resources, including young people and those directly working with them, or do we mainly encounter them through a report or a spreadsheet?
- Do we build trust with those we are considering funding and supporting? Would they come to us if they needed support or if something went wrong?
- Have we thought about what kinds of funding or support would be most appropriate for the educational practice that is being evaluated?
- Do our systems favour organisations that are rooted long-term in communities, or those with the largest fundraising and administrative infrastructures?
- Do we look at how our processes embed, reinforce, and/or challenge inequalities and stereotypes in relation to class, race, income, gender, gender identity, sexuality and dis/ability?
- Do we encourage practitioners to evaluate practice in ways that are meaningful in their process as well as their results, having the potential to improve practice?
- Do we support organisations to engage meaningfully and support participatory decision making by practitioners, young people (including those from marginalised groups who may not be served by current practices), and (where relevant) parents, carers, family members and the wider community?

An approach to accountability that focuses on creating the conditions for high quality practice and impact (rather than on its measurement) requires a radically different approach by managers, organisations, funders and policy makers, including taking seriously perspectives that challenge the status quo. This is difficult to imagine without a transformed political and economic system; yet paradoxically, it could be part of that transformation. Creating, developing, using and sharing alternative approaches to evaluation can be seen as a means of resisting the dominant neoliberal logic. Storytelling workshops, introduced thoughtfully and critically and with the engagement of youth workers and young people, will not change the world on their own; but they can contribute to a culture that values dialogue, learning, questioning, process, creativity and the messiness of practice.

## Conclusion: re-imagining accountability in education

Accountability in education must centre critical dialogue and decision-making by those who are most involved: young people, learners or students, and education practitioners. This article has discussed storytelling workshops as a bottom-up evaluation practice that foregrounds dialogue and, as such, embodies one aspect of a fundamental change in social and political relations. Although the article has focused on the youth work context, storytelling workshops also have considerable potential in other educational settings such as schools, adult education, universities and arts-based learning.

Yet the potential for such alternatives is constrained if decision making processes within organisations and in wider policy is not also transformed. Top-down systems of accountability rely on visions of democracy through consumption and investment, rooted in a neoliberal imaginary. In education, this means that practitioners and young people are marginalised in different yet overlapping ways by systems that foreground decontextualised statistics and render organisations comparable in a competitive market. Notions of evidence are impoverished, reduced to what is countable and monetisable. Those who experience and implement evaluation and monitoring mechanisms on the ground are rarely included in decision making, and their criticisms are readily dismissed. Grassroots organisations with deep knowledge of and commitment to their communities often lose out in these processes, particularly those that refuse to engage in demeaning evaluation, and/or are seen as 'risky' due to their small size or uncompromising community engagement.

Critique and resistance are vital, including through the production, use, sharing and debate around alternatives. This is a challenging task; however, if we are to change the inequalities and exclusionary practices that are inherent to education, we need to transform what we mean by accountability, and create new systems of evaluation. Alternatives such as storytelling workshops can be beneficial in evaluating and developing practice, in challenging top-down managerial accountability, in creating democratic cultures of accountability; and in communicating the process and impact of education in all its complexity. Alongside such alternatives, broader changes are needed: cultures of trust for practitioners and professionals; respect for young people's central role in shaping services; challenges to class-based, racialised, gendered, homophobic, transphobic and ableist logics; and a fundamental transformation in the entire way in which society and the economy is governed. In the meantime, it is important that alternatives continue to be imagined, debated, practised and shared, as part of a wider rethinking of education and society as a whole.

## Notes

1. See <https://story-tellinginyouthwork.com/story-telling-in-organisational-development-ii/in> which a senior manager and a youth worker from a youth service discuss their approach to using storytelling as part of monitoring procedures.
2. There may be cultural professional factors to be taken into account, too – when facilitating a workshop in an Eastern European country, practitioners said they were uncomfortable with sharing challenges or ambivalent experiences outside of their own organisation, telling me that this is not usually done. In this situation, it was important to spend more time on issues of trust and confidentiality.

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