

Youth work, performativity and the new youth impact agenda: getting paid for numbers?

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ABSTRACT

A growing policy emphasis on measurement and outcomes has led to cultures of performativity, which are transforming what educators do and how they feel about themselves in relation to their work. While most analysis of performativity in education has focused on schools, this article investigates parallel developments in youth work. Youth work is a practice of informal education, in which young people learn and develop through activities, conversation and association. Its evaluation and monitoring have changed over the past two decades, as funding has become tied to targets and measurable outcomes. This article focuses on the English context, where government and third sector organisations are promoting a 'youth impact agenda', encouraging organisations to predefine and measure their outcomes. Drawing on data from interviews and focus groups with youth workers, the article argues that the current emphasis on impact risks further marginalising youth work at a time when this practice is already suffering from extensive spending cuts. The article concludes that we need to re-think the purposes and processes of evaluation and accountability - in youth work and beyond - in ways that genuinely value the perspectives of young people and grassroots practitioners.

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Introduction

Youth work is a practice of informal education in which youth workers build relationships with young people in community settings such as youth clubs, community centres and on the streets. Since the 2008 global financial crash, funding cuts have had a devastating impact on this work, leading to extensive closures and redundancies (Unison 2016; Berry 2017). Yet alongside the conspicuous threat of reduced funding, concomitant policy shifts have received less attention, even though their implications may be at least as powerful. This article discusses the new youth impact agenda, which is transforming how youth work is monitored and evaluated, and which may - in its current form - threaten the nature and long-term survival of grassroots open youth work practice.

These changes to the youth sector take place in a wider context in which 'numbers' have become a key policy concern in education and non-profit sectors internationally as a central

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element of neoliberal governance. Schools, universities and youth centres are ‘economised’ – their effectiveness is increasingly framed in terms of their measureable contribution to the labour market. As Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti (2013, 541) put it:

The human capital framing of meta-policy in education is associated with new state structures, and steering at a distance through data and performance measures. The significant role that numbers play within this context, with its increasing emphasis on *evidence-based policy making*, cannot be denied.

Lingard and colleagues make the important point that numbers, data and performance measures are used not only *in* policy, but *as* policy; numbers have become a means to ‘steer’ education practice ‘at a distance.’ While their discussion focuses on schooling (in Australia and internationally), their argument is highly relevant to youth work, which is heavily governed by the conditions attached to its income in the form of contracts, grants, and donations. As government departments, funding agencies and private philanthropists throughout the world become more outcome-focused, this is having a significant influence on youth work practice.

The increased prominence of numbers *in* and *as* youth policy is an international phenomenon, which is most thoroughly embedded in the USA’s youth development sector (Mihalic and Elliott 2015). USA-based foundations such as United Way and Nike Foundation, which operate domestically and through international development, have pioneered ‘theory of change’ logic models and quantitative impact measurement in their programmes. These approaches are gaining substantial international purchase, yet (as will be discussed later) they have been criticised for being intrusive and unethical, time-intensive, and tending to reinforce deficit narratives in relation to low income and Black young men and women (Sheridan-Rabideau 2008; Moeller 2013; Baldrige 2014; Carpenter 2016).

This article focuses on youth work in the English context, where the past two decades have seen a move away from qualitative evaluation, at first through the introduction of targets and performance measures, and more recently towards more sophisticated impact measurements and mechanisms.¹ In particular, the focus here is on how these changes are experienced by part-time and volunteer youth workers, and how grassroots youth work is likely to be affected by these shifts in the longer term. The subtitle of this article is inspired by the words of Sarah, a youth worker who left her job at a charity to set up a new social enterprise. Her motivation for this change was disillusionment with the funding-oriented practices of her previous employer:

They started going for all the government contracts ... All the projects went out the windows, and it was basically accredited training, bums on seats, let’s get paid for numbers. And I just couldn’t do it. I really, I just felt really bad for the young people, I felt I wasn’t doing what I was trained to do, what I wanted to do, what I felt passionate about ...²

Sarah felt she was ‘paid for numbers’ by her former employer, where her role was funded on the basis of how many young people attended a course, attained an accredited qualification, and/or entered education or employment. Performance targets of this kind were introduced by the New Labour government (1997–2010), which – amongst other effects – began to normalise systems of measurement and monitoring that had previously been unusual in youth work. This enabled further developments under the Coalition (2010–2015) and Conservative (2015–) governments, and during this time ‘getting paid for numbers’ has become increasingly widespread and complex. Organisations are urged to predefine programme outcomes and adopt standardised tools to measure changes in young people’s

behaviour and attitudes between the beginning and end of an intervention. Such outcomes-oriented approaches have been widely supported by national youth sector organisations (Bracey 2016; Lent 2016). However, there has been contestation by practitioners at the grassroots level, vocalised most clearly by the campaign group In Defence of Youth Work, where it is argued that quantifiable impact mechanisms are inconsistent with youth-centred and informal education approaches (Taylor 2017).

This article contributes to a critique of the growing dominance of numbers in youth policy, connecting this critique with scholarship on performativity as a technology of neoliberal governmentality in education policy. In 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity', Ball (2003) argued that the contemporary regulation of educators is based on a system of judgements and comparisons as a means of control and change in a marketised context. In performative systems, evaluation does not simply measure a pre-existing phenomenon; rather, it both shapes and restricts the field of practice (Lyotard 1984). Understandings of performativity enable an analysis of how the techniques associated with accountability change what we do as educators, learners and participants, while also shaping who we think we are: our identities and emotions. Most analyses of performativity in education have focused on formal settings: schools (e.g. Perryman 2009), further education (e.g. Lumby 2009) and higher education (e.g. Ball 2012). While these are important arenas because of their influence on so many people's lives, it is also important to look at marginalised forms of education such as youth work. Here, there are no equivalents of 'school league tables' or 'inspections' (common foci of performativity analyses); yet the fragility of youth work gives particular power to subtler regimes of governance such as those imposed by contracts and funding agreements. This means that the dominance of pre-defined outcomes and numerical data could threaten the legitimacy - and even the long-term survival - of an entire field of practice.³

Inappropriate monitoring mechanisms can obstruct the building of mutual and trusting relationships that start from young people's interests, experiences and wishes, as well as incentivising workers to favour those young people who are most compliant in relation to fulfilling the requirements of audit (Tiffany 2007). They can also position Black and working class young women and men as 'lacking', deviant, and conforming to deficit-based tropes (Moeller 2013; Baldrige 2014). It is important to acknowledge that it is not numbers-based monitoring alone that has such effects; deficit views of young people existed in youth work well before the current impact agenda. Nonetheless, scholars have argued that youth work's informal, open, person-centred and context-dependant features make the quantitative measurement of pre-defined outcomes *particularly* problematic (Jeffs and Smith 2008; Fusco 2013; Ord 2014; Davies 2015; Duffy 2017).

This article subjects the growth of the youth impact agenda to critical scrutiny, drawing on data from a qualitative study of how part-time youth workers experienced their work in the context of policy change during the Coalition government years (de St Croix 2016). In doing so, it contributes to scholarship that is concerned with how policy is enacted and experienced at the detailed level of practice (Thomson, Hall, and Jones 2010; Perryman et al. 2011; Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012), and in 'the very tangled way people sense, intuit and experience the complexities of contemporary forms of government' (Pors 2016, 3). Its aim is to highlight how an increased intensity of measurement and monitoring is experienced and felt in grassroots youth work, and how practice will be affected by the new emphasis on 'youth impact'.

My argument is not that accountability mechanisms are always or inevitably negative in their effects. Few would disagree that youth work must be accountable to a variety of

constituencies including young people, parents, funders and local communities. Neither do I deny the usefulness of numbers for furthering social justice objectives. Rather, my point is that current approaches to accountability tend to be managerial rather than democratic - they rely on surveillance, comparison and routine administrative practices, which are likely to restrict and undermine the potential contribution of youth work in young people's lives - and that in times of dwindling funds, they direct resources towards programmes that are most amenable to measurement and monetisation. In these ways, the high status of numbers-based monitoring has a key role in enabling and furthering neoliberal managerialism. Together, these processes have clear implications for informal and youth-centred practices in an already inhospitable policy and funding environment. In short, I will be arguing that the current youth impact agenda is likely to move the youth sector further from its roots in process-oriented, practice-centred evaluation, and that this process will define and narrow what counts as 'good' youth work.

In what follows, I outline youth work's distinctive informal education tradition in the English context, and discuss how numbers-based, outcome-focused cultures of performativity have become normalised, marking a shift away from previous qualitative and informal mechanisms of evaluation. This is followed by an account of the study informing this article. I then analyse interview and focus group data to discuss how youth workers and young people are affected by performative target and impact cultures in practice, and draw out the implications of what this data suggests about how the ongoing dominance of quantitative impact measurement will affect the overall provision of youth services, followed by some concluding remarks and suggestions for ways forward.

Background: youth work and the emergence of the impact agenda

What is youth work?

Youth work is a distinctive practice of informal education with diverse international roots, growing out of 18th and nineteenth century experiments in education and social work (Coussée 2008; Smith 2013). Today, it encompasses purpose-built youth centres, youth clubs in community buildings or schools, detached youth work on the streets and in parks, groups drawing on shared identity (e.g. girls work, LGBT groups) and projects based on activities such as sport, art or drama. Youth work is organised by a wide range of voluntary organisations, social enterprises, local government and religious organisations, and most youth work spaces are situated in working class and low income neighbourhoods and are free or very cheap to attend. Characteristically, young people become involved by choice in their leisure time, often engaging over many years (Batsleer 2008; Sapin 2013; Davies 2015). Youth work's professional status varies across and within different countries, in some places being encompassed within social work or teaching, and elsewhere being entirely run by volunteers. In the UK, youth and community work is distinct from related professions, and has its own accredited qualifications up to undergraduate and postgraduate degree level, although many youth workers are unqualified and the majority are unpaid volunteers.

In England and throughout the UK, youth work is underpinned by a tradition of informal education and the 'voluntary principle', which foregrounds young people's choice of whether, how much, and for how long to get involved. Elsewhere, youth work tends towards more structured approaches; for example, in the USA it often takes the form of 'after school' and

‘positive youth development’ programmes with specific aims and outcomes, whereas in much of Europe and Australia youth workers are often based in housing projects, hostels and young offender’s institutions. These more structured forms of youth provision have grown in influence in the UK in recent years, partly as a result of the funding and monitoring procedures discussed in this article, yet the informal education tradition remains highly influential – particularly in youth clubs, street-based settings and empowerment or shared identity groups. In referring to these ‘less formal’ approaches and settings, the European term ‘open youth work’ (POWYE 2016) is useful: it emphasises not only an open admissions policy but also an open-ended engagement with young people in peer group settings, that starts from their starting points rather than from pre-defined outcomes or agendas, and works with them for as long as they choose to participate (in contrast to programmatic, time-limited, or evangelical youth projects).

Open youth work is particularly unsuited to ‘measurement’ because of its open-ended nature and its basis in peer group learning and informal education. Rather than outcomes being defined in advance, they emerge in negotiation with young people, and the focus is likely to shift and develop in relation to the specific individuals and groups attending, their needs and interests, and the changing social and political context in which they take place. The everyday activities of open youth work can even appear chaotic or purposeless to an outsider: perhaps a rowdy game of cards is in progress in a corner; another group is gathered around chatting and laughing; some people are painting a mural; others appear to be in deep and serious conversation by the kettle. These ‘everyday’ situations are supplemented with more structured elements introduced in negotiation with young people (perhaps an outdoor activities residential or making a film); ‘projects’ that are easier to report on. What is more difficult to describe, let alone measure, is the long-term relationship-based engagement that is at the core of the work, and without which specific projects would be less likely to happen; there is a significant focus in open youth work on process, on what happens ‘between the cracks’ and over time. It is this emphasis on and celebration of the informal and the open-ended that brings youth work into conflict with cultures of managerial accountability and performativity.

From evaluation to monitoring

In order to understand the effects of the youth impact agenda, it is important to understand what systems it replaces and builds upon. Before the last two decades, concerns about quality in open access youth work were most often addressed through improved training and an emphasis on critically reflective practice. Teams ‘debriefed’ at the end of each session, discussing interactions, observations, group processes, achievements and challenges. Workers met with a supervisor to reflect on practice, as well as in teams to evaluate and plan. Young people were involved in evaluation, including through informal discussions, club committees and creative participatory methods. Accountability for funding was assured through visits, discussions and written reports; significantly, senior managers and funding representatives were usually qualified and experienced youth workers themselves, with decades of practice experience. This pre-outcomes phase should not be romanticised; monitoring and evaluation were varied and uneven in quality, were rarely written up or independently researched, and it cannot be taken for granted that they were always inclusive or ‘bottom-up’. When done well, however, these approaches were characterised by a trusting, participative

and developmental approach, in which employers and funders were directly engaged with practice rather than monitoring outcomes ‘from a distance’.

By the 1990s, practice-oriented and process-driven forms of evaluation were falling out of step with the dominant agenda across the public and voluntary sectors. New public managerialism developed throughout the next two decades under the governments of both the right-wing Conservatives (1979–1997) and the centre-left New Labour (1997–2010). Methods were borrowed from private businesses, and performance targets featured with increasing prominence in the governance of schools, youth offending teams, social work and health care (Power 1994; Gewirtz 2002; Mooney and Law 2007). Such changes came relatively late to youth work, where the tipping point was New Labour’s ‘Resourcing Excellent Youth Services’ policy (DfES 2002), which required English local authorities to monitor services against benchmarks that became known colloquially as the ‘REYS’ outcomes (see Table 1).

The REYS benchmarks were operationalised as compulsory targets for publicly funded youth projects. Local authorities purchased electronic database systems that tracked the attendance and outcomes of individual young people, and every youth club, street-based team or specialised project receiving government funding was given targets to meet. Youth workers now needed to ensure that each young person was registered on a database and that their participation and achievements were monitored. This constituted a significant change in the culture of youth work, provoking concern over privacy, surveillance and bureaucracy, and significantly reducing the time spent on traditional qualitative forms of evaluation with colleagues and young people (de St Croix 2009).

Although the ‘REYS’ benchmarks were made non-mandatory in 2009, they remained a high-stakes performance mechanism in most local authority and voluntary sector settings for years afterwards (de St Croix 2016). This widespread and voluntary retention of REYS attests to the normalisation of targets and measurement, which came to stand for the quality and competence of services and workers. As an indirect result, evaluation for quality and service improvement became conflated with monitoring for accountability. Within less than a decade, youth work had moved from qualitative practice-centred forms of evaluation to a system of externally imposed targets monitored through electronic databases.

From targets to impact?

In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, youth work suffered disproportionately from cuts, redundancies and service closures. The government’s own figures showed that spending on English youth services had been cut by a third between 2010 and 2014 (Barton and Edgington 2014), and cuts have continued apace since then (Unison 2016; Berry 2017). Even

Table 1. ‘Resourcing Excellent Youth Services’ (REYS) benchmarks.

Reach	Proportion of local 13–19 year olds in contact with youth services
Participation	Percentage of that age group who participate regularly in youth services
Recorded outcomes	Number of participants achieving an outcome (e.g. improvements in confidence or behaviour). In practice, the target was often met by a young person and/or youth worker filling in a form to state that the young person participated in an activity or learned a skill
Accredited outcomes	Number of participants who achieve an accredited qualification, e.g. first aid, Duke of Edinburgh Awards, Youth Achievement Awards, or an AQA basic skills certificate

Source: DfES (2002); interviews and observations.

before the 2015 election was won by a Conservative government promising further spending reductions, three quarters of local authorities surveyed by the government expected that ‘all or nearly all’ funding for young people’s services could be cut by 2020 (Cabinet Office 2014, 15). Open access provision was hit hardest, as local authorities and voluntary sector organisations prioritised ‘targeted’ support and programmatic youth work over youth clubs, street based work and groups based on shared identity (Davies 2013; Unison 2016).⁴

Amidst these cuts a new ‘youth impact agenda’ emerged, sparked by a House of Commons Education Committee (2011) inquiry that accused the youth sector of providing inadequate evidence of its outcomes. In his evidence to the inquiry, the Minister for Civil Society, Nick Hurd, suggested that there was ‘a role for the Government to knock heads together, to see whether we can bring about some consensus and clarity’ (27). The government subsequently commissioned the Catalyst consortium led by the Young Foundation to develop a *Framework of Outcomes for Young People* (McNeil, Reeder, and Rich 2012). This proposed a cluster of social and emotional capabilities that young people might gain from involvement in youth projects, and suggested a range of tools, scales and surveys (all quantitative) that could be used to measure these outcomes.

Subsequently, the government’s Cabinet Office set up the Centre for Youth Impact in 2014 to coordinate efforts to improve evaluation and evidence in the youth sector. Its two senior staff were previously the head of Catalyst and a senior policy advisor for the Cabinet Office. Although a small organisation, the Centre quickly became influential in the youth sector, providing a hub for impact enthusiasts and working in partnership with ‘early adopter’ youth organisations such as the Brathay Trust, which produce and circulate their own impact and evaluation recommendations (Stuart and Maynard 2015; Stuart, Maynard, and Rouncefield 2015).

In these ways, the youth impact agenda has been actively supported by government throughout its development, but is not directly imposed through legislation or compulsory performance targets. This is an example of policy ‘steering at a distance’ (Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013, 541), a key technique of neoliberal governmentality. The role of government is not to legislate, but rather to encourage market-making practices. Such ‘steering at a distance’ can appear inclusive and decentralised, and indeed may be experienced as such – for example, Centre for Youth Impact gatherings constitute an arena for debate, and have included perspectives critical of the dominant impact agenda. Yet, as Ozga (2008, 268) has argued, policy processes that appear to be inclusive and horizontal may nevertheless carry classifications that are hierarchical, vertical and difficult to avoid.

In the case of the youth impact agenda, these ‘hierarchical’ classifications include a strong steer towards predefined and measurable outcomes, mapped by a ‘theory of change’ logic model. ‘Theory of change’ is an approach to evaluation in which organisations make explicit the desired outcomes of a programme and the steps towards achieving these outcomes: it is usually expressed visually as ‘a logic model that states that in order to achieve outcome C in a social context, you will put steps A and B into place’ (Stuart, Maynard, and Rouncefield 2015, 102). In building a theory of change, organisations must predefine the outcomes they want to achieve and establish a relationship of cause and effect; this can be problematic in a complex field such as youth work, where diverse outcomes emerge from a non-linear, youth-centred process (Duffy 2017). Theory of change and logic models are used internationally in community and development programme evaluation, yet have been criticised for reinforcing deficit and individualised views of young people, while obscuring structural inequalities (Moeller

2013; Carpenter 2016). There is a clear dominance of theory of change approaches and measurable indicators throughout influential documents and discussions of youth impact, which together produce a clear and often explicit hierarchy, underpinned by empiricist assumptions about what counts (and what does not count) as ‘good evidence’ (Duffy 2017).

Normalising impact

In this process of governing ‘at a distance’, parts of the so-called ‘third sector’ of voluntary, non-profit, philanthropic and social enterprise organisations play a crucial role in normalising and embedding the impact agenda. Charitable impact has become a central theme in the UK voluntary sector (Lomax and Wharton 2014), inspired partly by experience in the USA, where the non-profit sector saw an ‘explosion of outcome measurement activity’ as early as two decades ago (Plantz, Greenway, and Hendricks 1997, 19). In an analysis of the structural factors and networks underpinning the normalisation of social impact reporting throughout the UK social sector, Morley (2016) has argued that an elite group of social investment professionals working in key organisations have played an instrumental role. One of these organisations is NPC, formerly New Philanthropy Capital, which was formed in an investment bank, and aims explicitly to ‘make good impact measurement the norm’ (Handley, Weston, and Kazimirski 2015, 4). NPC and other social investment organisations investigated by Morley (2016), notably Impetus PEF, are widely involved in promoting impact measurement in the youth sector.

In this process of ‘normalisation’, austerity has played an enabling and legitimising role. Austerity and the need to ‘save money’ are presented throughout government and non-governmental documents as both driver and opportunity, as in this quotation from the *Framework of Outcomes for Young People*:

At this time of great financial austerity, all public spending is under scrutiny ... As a consequence, there is increasing pressure to assess and articulate the value that services produce, both for the young people who use them and for society as a whole ... The financial pressures also make it ever more essential that all services working with and for young people focus on identifying the approaches that will have the greatest impact in improving outcomes and reducing calls on the public purse. (McNeil, Reeder, and Rich 2012, 6).

As in many other voluntary sector and government texts on youth impact, this quotation places austerity and the need for impact measurement in adjacent sentences or phrases. This is an example of what Fairclough (2010) calls a ‘logical connector’, in which texts produce a misleading sense of coherence, presented as common sense and serving to cue pre-existing ideological assumptions. The ‘common sense’ neoliberal rationale here is that reduced spending is inevitable and necessary, and that services must focus on approaches that can evidence impact and reduce the need for future government spending. Youth services are valued, then, by the extent to which their ‘outcomes’ can be monetised, ‘proven’ to reduce notional future spending in more expensive areas of public service.

Another ‘logical connection’ commonly seen in youth impact texts is that of ‘outcome’ and ‘measurement’. The words ‘evaluation’, ‘evidence’, ‘data’ and ‘measurement’ are often used interchangeably in policy documents, serving to conflate evidence with numbers and sideline qualitative forms of research and evaluation. This mirrors developments in the governance of schooling – a ‘policy as numbers’ agenda (Lingard 2011), in which quantitative data-based evaluation has become a powerful policy instrument that enables new

systems of governance (Ozga 2009). This datafication or scientification of policy both reflects and reproduces the growing dominance of data in everyday life, where statistics are presented and understood as inherently 'factual' and objective (Thomson, Hall, and Jones 2010; Kennedy and Hill 2017). Under the new youth impact agenda, 'getting paid for numbers' becomes normalised as funding agencies reward organisations that are able and willing to measure their effectiveness in numerical and monetary terms.

While there is considerable support for the impact agenda amongst national youth sector organisations, this support has been far from unanimous; the Director of the Centre for Youth Impact commented that youth impact is 'the most contentious, hotly debated and provocative area in which I've ever worked' (McNeil 2015). Yet in these debates, the voices of practitioners – particularly face-to-face youth workers, who are charged with implementing these impact procedures and processes on the ground - are rarely to be heard.

The study and methodology

The study that provides the empirical data for this article was based on an open question: how do paid and unpaid part-time youth workers experience their work in a changing policy context? The data was collected over a period of three years between early 2011 and late 2013 through in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups involving 35 youth workers in different areas of England, alongside ethnographically-informed participant observation in two youth organisations in East London. The study was granted ethical approval by King's College London. The research participants self-defined as part-time youth workers, having volunteered to take part in the study in response to an email sent around various youth worker networks. Participants worked for a variety of organisations including local authority youth services, charities and social enterprises. Eighteen were employed as paid part-time youth workers, seven were volunteers, and ten had both paid and voluntary youth work roles. They had diverse class backgrounds, ethnicities and genders, and worked in various settings including youth clubs, street-based youth work, and/or empowerment projects such as LGBT groups. Many had become youth workers through volunteering in youth projects they had attended as young people, and more than half were in their teens or twenties. The names used here are pseudonyms chosen by the participants, and the names of organisations, specific geographical locations and other identifying material have been removed. Table 2 provides details of the participants quoted in this article.

The focus on part-timers was a research decision to privilege the views of grassroots practitioners who undertake most of the direct youth work with young people, who are (usually) relatively junior in their organisations, and whose views are rarely represented in either policy or research. This was the first study to focus specifically on part-time youth workers since Bolger and Scott's (1984) review of part-timers' training over thirty years ago. Part-time youth workers are more likely to be women and/or from black and ethnic minority backgrounds than their senior colleagues (Mellor and McDonnell 2010), and in general reflect more closely the backgrounds of the young people they work with (Tiffany 2007). Their views were particularly important in the context of policy change, including a greater focus on targets and outcomes, that was having acute effects on part-timers at the time of the study (Davies and Merton 2009).

Twenty-two youth workers took part in semi-structured, in-depth interviews of between one and three hours in length. These interviews took place in their workplaces or local

Table 2. Research participants.

Pseudonym	Organisation(s)	Region	Youth work setting(s)	Employment status(es)	Ethnicity and class background (where known) ^a
Alan	Local authority	London	Centre-based; community-based	Part-time paid	White middle-class
Forde	Local authority	London	Detached; mobile bus; girls' group	Part-time paid	Black
John	Local authority	South East	Detached; centre-based; project	Part-time paid	White
Laura	Voluntary sector	London	Detached; community-based	Part-time paid	Latina working class
Lorne	Voluntary sector (previously local authority)	London	Community-based; Trans group	Volunteer (previously full-time paid)	White middle-class
Louise	Local authority	South Central	Detached; centre-based	Volunteer	White
Mickie	Voluntary sector	North West	LGBT group; girls group	Volunteer; part-time paid	White working-class
Nicola	Voluntary sector	North West	Centre-based	Volunteer	Black working-class
Sam	School	North West	After-school group	Volunteer	White working-class
Sarah	Social enterprise	London	Community-based; participation	Part-time self-employed	Mixed heritage working-class
Zandra	Social enterprise; voluntary sector	London	Employment support; community-based	Part-time self-employed	Black working-class

Note: For reasons of space, only those quoted in this article are listed.

^aI did not always ask participants about their ethnicity and class background.

cafés, using an open conversational approach inspired by feminism, ethnography and grounded theory, in which the interviewee is given space to shape the interview (Oakley 1990; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995; Charmaz 2006). This was encouraged by a flexible topic guide based on a small number of open questions such as 'how did you become a youth worker?' and 'what do you like and dislike about your work?' Seventeen of these interviews were individual, one was with two colleagues, and one was with a group of three colleagues. The in-depth interviews were complemented by a series of three focus groups, which took place at monthly intervals and involved a further eight youth workers (one of whom also took part in an individual interview). The focus groups used an innovative methodology drawn from community philosophy, in which participants take an active role in developing and selecting questions and issues to discuss (Tiffany 2009; de St Croix 2016).

The study also included three years of ethnographically informed participant observation in two youth work organisations in East London and two further focus group discussions with six colleagues from one of these organisations. Data from these elements of the research are not directly included in this article, although they inevitably inform the analysis, as does my own long experience as a part-time and volunteer youth worker, and my involvement in practice networks including In Defence of Youth Work and the Federation for Detached Youth Work.

The data analysis was an iterative process that was integrated throughout the study (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Analysis began in discussion with research participants during the interviews, continued through the careful transcribing of audio recordings, and moved on to line-by-line coding and memo-writing to identify concepts, themes and narratives (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Charmaz 2006). This involved careful reading and

re-reading of transcripts and field notes, making notes on rich, descriptive content, narrative elements, prominent themes, and contradictions or absences within and between different elements of data. Alongside the empirical data, policy texts were analysed, drawing on elements of Fairclough's (2010) critical discourse analysis. These texts include government publications, speeches and interviews, as well as websites, blogs and reports of organisations and individuals influential in youth sector policy and practice.

While the research was undertaken in the early years of the youth impact agenda, and I did not ask youth workers directly about evaluation or 'impact', the themes of data, targets and outcomes were highly prominent throughout all forms of data. Often, these themes arose in response to the question, 'What don't you like about your work?' However, this should not suggest that youth workers' experiences of and feelings about monitoring were always or only critical. To understand the complex and contradictory ways in which policy around youth impact is enacted in practice and 'at a distance' (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Lingard, Martino, and Rezai-Rashti 2013), it is vital to look at the experiences and perception of grassroots practitioners.

Normalising youth impact in practice

While there was no single clear 'beginning' to the youth impact agenda, its roots were in the 2008 financial crash and the election of a Conservative-led (centre right) coalition government, which pledged to reduce public spending. Studies conducted before this time had already established with remarkable consistency that targets and outcomes were unpopular with young people and youth workers (Crimmens et al. 2004; Spence and Devanney 2006; Tiffany 2007). My study found that the mistrust of outcomes-based approaches continued in the new circumstances of austerity and under different political leadership. In interviews and focus groups, part-time workers' frequent use of such phrases as 'numbers game' and 'box ticking' suggested that such processes were experienced as inauthentic and tokenistic:

Things that I don't so much enjoy, is the kind of numbers game of having to tick boxes. (Mickie)

There's a difference, evaluating [with] a young person ... and an outcome of 'kerching', tick a box. It's the motive behind it that I don't like. (Sam)

There was a marked contrast between the weary and cynical tone with which outcomes and targets were discussed, and the workers' general passion and enthusiasm for their practice. They clearly felt that the targets they were required to meet did not reflect the complex contexts in which their work was carried out:

What I can't stand ... it's so target orientated ... It's all about targets ... But there's obviously other factors that influence young people. (Zandra)

Throughout the data, 'numbers', 'targets', 'tick boxes' and 'paperwork' were used as shorthand for the diverse systems of monitoring and evaluation required by local authorities, funders and employers. While many projects were monitored through the defunct New Labour 'REYS' outcomes discussed earlier, others used mechanisms characteristic of the new impact agenda, such as questionnaires at the beginning and end of projects that purported to measure nebulous concepts such as confidence or well-being (McGimpsey 2015). In practice, the workers often conflated these different types of monitoring, which they felt tended to have similar effects, undermining the voluntary, respectful and informal nature of their relationships with young people.

Targets, paperwork and relationships

Negotiating relationships with young people is central to effective youth work, particularly in open settings where engagement and attendance is voluntary and the atmosphere is informal. Many young people engage in youth work at least partly because the relationships are qualitatively different from those in more formal settings; this is underpinned by the voluntary nature of young people's participation, which enables power to be 'tipped' in favour of young people (Davies 2015). For these reasons, young people who struggle to trust adults may feel more comfortable in youth work settings than in more formal institutions. All of this means that youth work relationships can be particularly powerful, sometimes constituting a young person's first 'chosen' relationship with an adult – and yet they are also fragile, particularly in the early stages. The following quote articulates powerfully how the very recording of an outcome might disrupt the nature of a youth work encounter:

You sit down with a kid and you have a really meaningful conversation with them and you're like, 'Now can you fill in this sheet and tell me-', it's like it completely undermines everything that you've just done ... 'You've only just had that conversation with me about my life and the different issues I've got at the moment so you can record it? So it looks like you're a decent youth worker? Is that it?' It's, yeah, bullshit. (Alan)

Young people 'saw through' monitoring systems, aware that these mechanisms were used to assess workers and organisations rather than to improve services. Youth workers spoke about young people's resistance to paperwork and computerised monitoring systems; in the following quotation, Zandra discusses her experience on an employment support project where young people's outcomes were assessed through a variety of forms of monitoring including 'before, during and after' questionnaires:

It's just – a lot of repetitive questions. [The young people ask] 'Why are you asking me?' and we're like, 'I'm sorry, it's the paperwork.' ... Sometimes they're like, 'Oh, I'm not doing it now' ... They go, 'Oh I'm not in the mind frame to do it now' and we say 'OK, we understand, when we see you next time.' It doesn't stop them coming. But we just – we chip away at them and say 'Are you willing to fill out the form now?' and eventually they'll say yes. You know. But it's just, so much information. (Zandra)

In this and other accounts, young people found questionnaires tedious and intrusive and only reluctantly agreed to fill them in; and workers felt obliged to trade on their relationships with young people in order to gain their compliance. While impact enthusiasts argue that evaluation can be embedded within projects and made creative and even fun (Stuart, Maynard, and Rouncefield 2015), this is not necessarily how it is experienced and enacted in practice, particularly in the most informal youth settings. In repeated accounts and in observations, young people refused or delayed the filling out of forms. Youth workers apologised, negotiated, persuaded, cajoled and bribed, providing rewards such as pizza, trips, motorcycle training and even financial incentives in exchange for turning up, filling out forms and producing documents.⁵ While old-style 'recorded outcomes' were often felt by workers to be 'meaningless', newer impact mechanisms – which asked young people about their behaviours and attitudes – were deemed even more intrusive because of the way in which they seemed to label and stereotype the young people according to criteria the youth workers preferred not to focus on:

... the amount of times I've had young people tell me, 'Oh, we're gonna go and take drugs now'
... I know they're trying to shock me, I know the amount of times they say things because that's

what they expect me to think about them. And that's what annoys me, that these targets, it's proving them right. They *know* what it's all about. (Laura)

While many youth workers avoid labelling or perceiving young people in 'deficit' terms, funding criteria and monitoring mechanisms often rely on these discourses – many of which contain implicit or explicit classed, racialised and gendered assumptions (Baldrige 2014). In addition to critiquing the process and underpinning assumptions of monitoring and evaluation methods, practitioners also expressed doubt that the tools used to measure outcomes and impact would represent the reality of what actually happens in a youth work setting: the slow-burn development of trusting relationships, group processes and real world, 'up and down' small achievements and set-backs. On the other hand, more qualitative or collective forms of evaluation were rarely discussed, perhaps pushed out by time constraints. While targets, 'paperwork' and numbers-based monitoring were widely criticised, they were simultaneously taken for granted, normalised, and difficult to avoid.

Performativity in youth work

Throughout education and the public sector, technologies associated with monitoring and evaluation create cultures of performativity, which govern and transform not only what we do as educators but also how we feel about ourselves and how we experience our work (Ball 2003). Numbers-based monitoring mechanisms have become inextricably bound up in how youth workers understand their roles and build their identities, even if they are critical of these measures. Local authority youth worker Forde had mentioned professionalism when discussing her role, and I asked whether she saw herself as a professional; her reply is a particularly clear articulation of performativity:

Yeah! I do ... I have standards. When I'm at work, I'm not Forde from home, I'm not Forde that has my home hat on. I'm Forde that comes to work, that yes, unfortunately we have to comply to standards, figures, numbers, that's what we are. We're numbers, we've got to reach a target, that is what we do. Unfortunately ... And it is figures, it's just targets, you've got to hit targets. So I do see myself as a professional in the sense that I come here, and you know, I wear the face of [borough] I guess.

Like other youth workers I spoke to, Forde identified numbers-based monitoring systems as both unfortunate and inevitable. Her identity as a professional is experienced as an embodied and symbolic shift from her 'home hat' to her 'local authority face'. Once Forde has put on this 'professional' face, numbers become both what she is and what she does: 'standards, figures, numbers, *that's what we are*. We're numbers, we've got to reach a target, *that is what we do*' (my emphasis). Performativity operates effectively as a technology of governmentality partly because of how it becomes embedded in professional identities. Committed youth workers want to do well for young people and for themselves, so their concerns over the methods used to externally validate their work do not negate their feelings of success when an outcome is met, and failure when a target is missed.

Numbers-based monitoring is normalised through discourses that circulate in both policy texts and practice settings, which elide quality with 'proven' impact. Policy texts construct a 'good' or 'effective' practitioner as one who is keen to demonstrate impact, while critics of the impact agenda are portrayed as outdated and unaccountable. The following quotation is from a blog written by the acting chair of the National Youth Agency:⁶

... commissioners are increasingly looking for evidence of impact and value for money. *Good youth workers* have always been able to do this. They manage to strike the right balance between creativity, innovation and securing improved outcomes ... *But not all youth workers are good* ... the focus now needs to shift from structural change to improving quality. For youth workers and their managers, this means taking direct action to tackle poor performance. Those colleagues who are not up to it or who don't think they're accountable to anyone other than the young people they work with, need to change quickly or be moved on. (Bracey 2016, my emphasis)

Here and elsewhere, the phrase 'good youth workers' is associated with 'evidence of impact', 'value for money' and 'improved outcomes', whereas 'poor performance' is co-located with 'don't think they're accountable'. The clear message is that good youth workers can evidence their impact – there is no recognition here of legitimate concerns about the effects or ethics of implementing particular monitoring and evaluation processes. Part-timers in my study were well aware that in order to be seen as 'good' and advance in their careers, they must embrace and implement monitoring and impact mechanisms. Some volunteered for additional and often unpaid responsibilities around the administration of evaluation and monitoring, such as gathering evidence and filling in databases:

John: What I found when I first started as a paid worker was that part-time workers were more like sessional workers ... They wouldn't actually be involved in why the project's happening, who's it targeting, what's it about ... what's the aims for the young people ... I turned round and said, 'Well, actually I need to be doing the full-time workers job, so I need to be involved in what's going on.' So now I'm involved doing the online evaluation system ...

Tania: And do you find it alright to use, and like, help out with all that stuff?

John: It's easy to use, once you get used to it. I mean, in some ways it feels like we're sort of watching the young people.

Despite the ambivalence John expresses here, his involvement in monitoring made him feel 'involved' while positioning him as promising and competent, doing the work of a full-timer. Workers can recognise the inappropriateness of measurement while at the same time finding it strangely alluring. This can be particularly true of part-timers who often feel excluded from 'what's going on' – and where involvement in 'what's going on' means playing a greater role in evaluation. Performativity works effectively as a technology of governmentality because monitoring outcomes is satisfying as well as unsettling, pleasurable as well as frustrating, easy as well as challenging: it 'works best when it is inside our heads and our souls' (Ball 2008, 52). Competition, pride and personal achievement help to instil and reinforce performative cultures, and the monitoring of young people's outcomes becomes an entrepreneurial project of self-improvement (Rose 1996). These are subtle forms of governmentality in which workers and young people seem to 'choose' to participate. However, it would be inaccurate to say that the entrepreneurial self is 'freely' chosen, particularly in times of austerity when individual successes and failures are inextricably bound up with the need to protect jobs and young people's resources.

Numbers as compliance

Performativity does indeed work best when internalised and engaged in by choice, but its 'powers of freedom' (Rose 1999) work alongside disciplinary power to quash resistance and ensure that workers comply. In repeated accounts, workers were told by colleagues

and managers that outcomes must be achieved, or their job and their project will be at risk. Often, these outcomes were spoken about and understood simply as ‘numbers’:

My line manager had said to me, ‘Lorne, you’re not meeting, you need to get more recorded and accredited outcomes down ... *without the numbers* you won’t be able to keep your job’ ... I did a lot of resisting and then I didn’t do so much resisting, and I thought, Ok, *I’d better do some numbers* ... I mean the lunacy of all of this, right, the absolute ridiculousness, is that this pressure from them is alongside *me reaching record numbers* in that youth project of young people attending, of making national links with organisations and doing projects of a national scale ... (Lorne; my emphasis)

In Lorne’s account, ‘numbers’ operate as threat, as resignation, and as pride. Numbers stand in for the meeting of targets, and also for the scale of workers’ and young people’s achievements. Numbers are ‘done’ and ‘reached’; they also seem to have an agency of their own. They are made tangible and visible on software systems, which play an important role in affirming or ‘naming and shaming’ workers and projects. Spreadsheets were used to record outcomes evidenced against those required by funding bodies, visualised colourfully as ‘RAG’ (‘Red, Amber, Green’) tracking, and converted into in-house ‘league tables’:

A big thing comes round to all the youth groups to tell you how the other youth centres are getting on. It’s like a pecking order. So depending on how many accreditations they’ve had, all that kind of thing ... it puts you in order of who’s had the most and who’s had the least and it gets sent round to everybody ... So then those people get hoicked in the office individually and spoken to about the fact that they either need to *get their numbers up* or they need to start putting more information on there. (Louise; my emphasis)

Workers are exhorted to ‘get their numbers up’; and in a system of ranking, nobody can rest because they will nearly always compare unfavourably with somebody else. Colour-coded spreadsheets, databases and other forms of data sorting and visualisation are difficult to question because ‘numbers’ tend to appear and *feel* objective, factual and neutral (Kennedy and Hill 2017). If a database reports that a project has not achieved its intended outcomes, the project and its workers will be perceived as failing. Thus performativity interacts with shame, an emotion that can be ‘both peculiarly contagious and peculiarly individuating’ (Sedgwick 2003, 36). Youth workers are positioned as defendants and senior managers as enforcers and, in this process, older forms of collective working are transformed. Team meetings are no longer arenas for reflection on practice, but rather opportunities to hold individuals publicly to account:

They [managers] were in love with this data monitoring ... These centre management meetings every Monday morning and we went round the table and there’s all the different projects in [borough] and all the managers sitting there ... The meetings were so dictatorial, authoritarian ... Basically they went round and they checked with every manager, had they entered their data for this week? And everyone had to say sort of ‘Yes’ and you did feel like you were sitting in the headmaster’s office at school while he was wielding a bloody cane or whatever. (Lorne)

Grassroots youth workers are governed in subtle ways through the pleasures and seductions of meeting targets and proving impact; they are also subject to disciplinary pressure from their managers, particularly in the wider context of spending cuts, redundancies and service closures. These pressures are all too real; many of the projects I visited during my research no longer exist, and several of the workers I interviewed have lost their jobs.

Performativity in times of austerity

Public judgement and comparison of youth workers and projects reinforces discourses of youth workers as good and impactful, or bad and resistant. This is an austerity discourse, reminiscent of welfare recipients being labelled as ‘strivers or skivers’ (Williams 2013). According to this logic, youth services are to blame for their own demise, as articulated by government minister Nick Hurd, who said that some local authority youth services were ‘ok to lose’ because they were ‘crap’ (Hayes 2013). Alongside increasingly short-term funding contracts and insecure employment practices, the cuts provide both backdrop and justification for the emergence of the new youth impact agenda; the cry of ‘value for money’ reinforces the demand for more measurement. Youth workers may criticise this logic, but their critique is tinged with a sense of resignation:

I hate the whole outcomes thing ... I hate the whole *measurable* outcomes. But then I think, how do we get money? Do you know, how, who’s gonna give you any money? We’re so driven by this kind of capitalist thing that if you’re not proving your value, how are you gonna survive? (Nicola)

Competition between providers for an ever-diminishing funding pot means that everybody must be an impact enthusiast. While there are critics of the impact agenda – most publicly articulated by the In Defence of Youth Work forum – most national youth organisations have been keen to support and associate themselves with the impact agenda, perhaps driven at least partly by concerns about their own survival. Under austerity, the stakes are high; open youth work is positioned as a luxury rather than a right, only seen as valuable if it can be evidenced to reduce public expenditure:

Young people have a monetary value, and it’s like, how much can we stop them causing us to pay for things, so how much can we get a better return on our investment in these young people? (Mickie)

Performativity acts as a neoliberal mechanism partly because of its ability to enable comparison between providers; yet youth projects are now less often compared against each other as they were in the days of the REYS targets, and young people are no longer positioned (only) as consumers of services. Instead, the preventative effect of youth provision is monetised, using the government’s *Green Book* (HM Treasury 2011) to calculate financial returns on investment, and young people now constitute investment opportunities. As McGimpsey (2017, 3) notes, such developments in the youth sector exemplify wider shifts within neoliberalism, where marketisation has given way to a ‘finance capital imaginary... whereby “investors” trade in a futures market to realise a “return”’. These developments are distasteful to many practitioners, who feel that such discourses position youth work as being of instrumental rather than of intrinsic value, and young people as potentially deviant:

Even youth workers are doing it though, they’re writing books going, ‘It will cost you seven hundred and fifty pounds a year, for one person, in this service, or – two thousand pound in prison!’ ... We’re making them horrible comparisons! (Nicola)

Outcomes orientations and performativity have much in common, yet should not be conflated. All evaluation regimes are (at least potentially) performative, encouraging and enabling certain practices and ways of being, and discouraging others. Yet what is specific about outcomes-based monitoring and new impact procedures is the way in which they create ‘factual’ information that is difficult to challenge, and are used to measure, compare and judge the ‘outcomes’ of youth work – and, crucially, to enable workers to measure, compare

and judge themselves. Such mechanisms favour certain kinds of practitioner, project and organisation: those that are amenable to measurement. They also favour certain kinds of evaluation; there is no room in the database, the spreadsheet or even the team meeting for reflection on practice or for critical debate. They favour certain kinds of young people, too; those who are willing to be 'worked on', happy to answer personal questions, and able to demonstrate a logical and incremental 'improvement' in behaviour or attitudes over time. The 'impactful' youth organisation relies on self-improving youth workers and self-improving young people – ideal entrepreneurial, neoliberal subjects.

Discussion

The quotations from part-time and volunteer youth workers in this article reflect feelings and experiences that are widespread – not only in youth work, but across the education sector and beyond - in relation to processes of evaluation and impact. The study was conducted at a time of change, when targets from the previous New Labour administration remained in force in many settings, while a newer impact agenda (encouraged by the Coalition government) was emerging. Target cultures retained significant power, while newer impact tools and discourses associated with social investment began to saturate policy texts and enter into the experience of these grassroots educators. Such changes in the youth sector reflect a wider datafication of both policy and everyday life, in which things that were previously qualitative are now rendered quantitative, relying on and reproducing an epistemological and political faith in numbers as representations of worth (Ozga 2009; Lingard 2011; Kennedy and Hill 2017).

The new youth impact agenda plays an important role in positioning the youth sector as a social investment opportunity, exemplifying the new finance capital imaginary on which current policy is based (McGimpsey 2017). Yet from the perspectives of workers in my study, target and impact orientations blurred and overlapped. Both rely heavily on an epistemological preference for numbers as evidence, and a neoliberal reliance on numbers as policy. Both recreate self-governing and self-improving entrepreneurial youth workers and young people, 'neoliberal subjects' who are 'constantly incited to invest in ourselves, work on ourselves and improve ourselves – drive up our numbers, our performance, our outputs – both in our personal lives and our work lives' (Ball 2015, 299). In the process of 'getting paid for numbers', practice is highly valued when it is quantifiable, and this means that time-limited and outcome-specific programmes become preferred over long-term, youth-centred approaches in which outcomes are – by their nature – unpredictable, uncertain and unguaranteed.

The experiences of grassroots youth workers in England have a specificity that reflects their particular context, yet similar effects of 'policy as numbers' are felt internationally and in numerous educational and social contexts (Lingard 2011). It is not that numbers themselves are always or inherently problematic; the issue is how they create performative systems of comparison and enable a marketised system. Numbers are seductive; the temptation is always to add more measurements rather than take them away. This leads to 'community data burden', in which organisations are required to collect multiple forms of data for multiple and often short-term funding streams (Darking et al. 2016). It also changes the overall balance of community provision, making 'more measurable' services fundable

and closing down 'less measurable' activities, or reshaping them in ways that make them more 'legible for the market and private appropriation' (Lipman 2013, 2).

The new youth impact agenda has inevitable effects; whether or not it is intentional, they act alongside widespread closure of services and lead to 'difficult to measure' practices such as open youth work being closed down, while structured and outcome-orientated programmes may be more able to 'prove' their worth in relation to newer impact regimes. In this way, the field of youth work is distorted by an impact agenda that acts alongside austerity to prioritise quantitative evaluation and emphasise 'proof of change' rather than (for example) valuing the intrinsic 'good' of young people having spaces where they can spend informal time with peers and interested adults, without having to measure, improve, and work on themselves. Such spaces may be increasingly important as young people seem to be coming under increasing pressure at school and in their everyday lives. In a system where organisations are competing for a shrinking pot of money, the new youth impact agenda is every bit as powerful as the top-down targets of the recent past and perhaps more so. In a precarious and market-based regime, funders, commissioners and philanthropists have tremendous power to shape and direct services. Impact-driven funding threatens forms of practice that are open-ended, long-term, youth-centred and relationship-based, and which have outcomes that are negotiated and fluid, emerging and changing over time. And yet, the dominant policy trend normalises quantifiable and standardised impact measures, not only in formal education settings where attainment has long been quantified, but also in informal settings.

Conclusion

Youth impact is a less visible and prominent policy agenda than spending cuts, yet it is likely to be at least as powerful in its reshaping of the youth sector, reflecting similar processes across the world and in other education and service sectors. The argument here is not against accountability per se, and neither is it against the use of numbers; rather, it is an argument for grassroots-based, deliberative and democratic forms of accountability that engage seriously with the dilemmas highlighted by analyses of performativity. Accountability for public and philanthropic money tends to be taken for granted as being in the interests of young people and communities; yet disadvantaged groups of young people are further marginalised where they are required to 'buy' their involvement in services by providing sensitive information, or identify themselves according to deficit discourses (Riele 2006; Baldridge 2014). Instead, there is a need to develop youth-centred and qualitative evaluation methodologies that are congruent with youth work itself (Gormally and Coburn 2014), not necessarily to identify young people's 'outcomes' (although this may be relevant for some services) but to find out from their own perspectives how and why they value the services they take part in. If young people seem reticent to comply with impact processes, we need to take their reluctance seriously and invite critical and open discussions. Similarly, it is important to take seriously the views and experiences of less senior practitioners (such as part-time youth workers) who spend much of their time with young people, tend to be nearer to their age and social background, and are often tasked with the implementation and enactment of impact measurements.

Policy mechanisms constrain, but they also create possibilities. The impact agenda has renewed discussions on the purpose of youth work, for example through the Centre for

Youth Impact's events and online content, which – as well as playing a central role in legitimising the 'measurement' discourse – also, paradoxically, provide a much-needed forum for critical debate and have included critical perspectives at times. Yet the top-down steer from policy documents such as the *Green Book* (HM Treasury 2011) is heavily skewed towards the monetising of measurable outcomes, and there is a clear preference for pre-defined and measureable outcomes amongst national youth sector bodies and influential organisations.

It is clear that there is a need for alternatives to the dominance of numbers and outcomes in the evaluation of youth provision. The development of such alternatives is challenging and complicated, and needs to be the subject of deliberative inquiry in its own right. Detailed consideration of alternatives is beyond the scope of this paper, yet in order to suggest some possible directions and issues, it is worth considering existing examples of bottom-up and practice-based alternatives to impact measurement. To give one example, In Defence of Youth Work has developed a story-telling methodology, which involves practitioners and/or young people meeting to engage in collective processes of critical questioning and reflection on stories from their experience (IDYW 2011). In this approach, a group of around ten people meets for approximately three hours with a facilitator. The facilitator invites real life 'stories' from the youth workers' or young people's experience, responding to a 'prompt' question such as 'what is the special impact that youth work has on young people's lives?' The group selects one story to hear in more detail, after which the facilitator and group members ask questions to enable the story-teller to 'unpick' elements of the story. Critical reflection is encouraged from the story-teller and group members on key processes, workers' interventions, dilemmas and uncertainties, possible outcomes, 'unfinished' elements, and in what ways the practice does (or does not) reflect the 'cornerstones' of youth work (IDYW 2014). The worker may then be supported to write up their story. The methodology has been used by local authorities and voluntary sector organisations in service evaluation and monitoring in the UK, and internationally by youth workers in Ireland, Japan and Scandinavia (IDYW 2014; Gretschel et al. 2017). Some of the key elements in this methodology, and similar models such as 'Most Significant Change' (Cooper 2014), are the focus on practice improvement, the acknowledgement that 'impact' is neither linear nor uncomplicated, and the valuing of a deliberative and collective process.

Such methodologies acknowledge the centrality and complexity of process and value collective reflection, playing an important role in practice development as well as the evaluation of educational services. Similar discussions are taking place in relation to mainstream education settings; for example, a recent National Union of Teachers report recommended a move away from league tables and 'exam factories', towards developmental processes of improvement such as collaborative peer visits (Hutchings 2015). Yet without thoroughly exploring the advantages and disadvantages of alternative approaches to evaluation, they are likely to remain not only marginal, but also under-scrutinised. Qualitative and deliberative methods of evaluation such as story-telling should not be romanticised; *all* methods of evaluation are performative, in that they are likely to encourage and legitimise certain practices. This is not to suggest that all approaches are as valid or harmful as each other, but rather that all forms of evaluation need, themselves, to be subject to collective critical reflection. For example, story-telling methodologies – without careful thought, and depending on their purposes and the skill and values of the facilitator, story-teller and group members – could be as likely as numbers-based systems to reproduce deficit-based or individualised discourses, and to feel intrusive to young people and burdensome to practitioners. In

addition, critics of the current impact agenda need to consider whether youth work can and should be accountable only to its participants and workers, whether policy makers and funding agencies have a legitimate claim to be involved, to what extent quantitative tools might play any role, and whether there are ways to involve independent evaluators without reproducing existing top-down power imbalances and epistemological preferences.

Alongside work on alternative approaches to evaluation, it is also necessary to think further about how policy and civil society can support services that have ‘intrinsic’ value for their participants, particularly when these participants come from groups that tend to be marginalised from decision-making and who struggle to access their rights. This is recognised even amongst some of the strongest advocates of youth impact; as the Head of ‘What Works’ at Dartington Social Research Unit put it in his blog on the Centre for Youth Impact website:

I think there is value in youth work: I just don’t think it is value that is easily captured in terms of outcomes or cost-benefit ratios ... Services don’t have to produce demonstrable outcomes to be of value. But it is hard to see policy makers being terribly convinced by this argument, at least in a climate of austerity ... (Nick Axford, 1st April, 2015).

It is difficult or impossible to evade entirely the logic of measureable outcomes in a marketised system of governance, and it may well be that collective, qualitative and contextual forms of evaluation – and the services that they support – will continue to be marginalised. However, marginalisation is not the same as disappearance, and there is power and hope in creating alternatives from the bottom up. For those educators, youth workers and researchers who believe in grassroots and participatory approaches to evaluation and accountability, it is important to think critically about the dominant forms of impact measurement, while also contributing – just as critically and reflectively – to the development of alternatives. This is important work; otherwise, as youth clubs, street-based projects and shared identity groups continue to be closed down, there will be even fewer places where a young person can go without their participation and achievements being tracked, measured, labelled, judged, surveyed and compared.

Notes

1. The focus here is specifically on England. Youth policy in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales is generally devolved to those jurisdictions.
2. Sarah was interviewed as part of the research project discussed below. Names of research participants have been changed.
3. Other marginalised education practices include adult education, museum education, prison education, environmental education and home schooling. For example, see King et al. (2015) on problematic aspects of the impact agenda in museums and science centres.
4. Between 2010 and the writing of this article, stories of local authorities planning to close their youth service or significantly reduce its budget have become ubiquitous in the youth sector press. See, for example, Lepper (2017) on Leicester City Council’s £1 million cut to its £1.8 million youth services budget, leading to a reduction from 42 open access youth work sessions per week to just 12. Unusually, young people were consulted; in a choice of where these youth service cuts should fall, the option to close all open access youth services was rejected by 96% of young people, suggesting that young people do not think open youth work is less important than targeted work, even when resources are tight.
5. Documents were required by some funders to prove, for example, young people’s identity, unemployed status, or evidence of a new job or college place.

6. The National Youth Agency was formed by government in 1964 as an information centre for youth services and practitioners. Losing its government funding after the 2008 financial crash, it is now an independent charity, retaining an official role in the accrediting of professional youth work courses.

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