



Visioning transformative youth work: *Celebrating, reflecting, resisting*

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Collaborative design day:
Visioning Transformative Youth Work
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Visioning transformative youth work:

Celebrating, reflecting, resisting

Celebrating

- Open youth work
- Passionate practice (in neoliberal times)
- Everyday and remarkable youth work

Reflecting

- Reflective practice and evaluating what we do
- Policy context – what counts as evidence?
- Practice context – how is evaluation experienced by young people and youth workers?

Resisting

- Are there spaces for resistance and collective action in youth work?
- What might this look like? What might we consider?

Situating my youth work journey

- Youth work participant and young activist
- Street-based youth and community worker and playworker
- Critical and radical youth work networks and writing
- Becoming a practitioner researcher
- Now at the Centre for Public Policy Research, King's College London
- Synergies with YouthREX - what I hope to share and learn



Celebrating, reflecting, resisting...

“I *love* it ... I *literally* spend the evening going from group to group chatting to people, anything they want to talk about... I think the face-to-face time is what keeps you real, it's what keeps you wanting to do it.”

(Navaeh, youth work volunteer, 2013)





Situating and defining “open youth work”

Spaces for informal education: learning through conversation, activity and relationship.

Open for young people to get involved *by choice*: rather than being referred, targeted or compelled to take part.

Open-ended: in timescale, content / activity, and intended outcomes.

Aligned with: critical positive youth development, community spaces, after school, youth action / organising / youth led practices, youth advice / advocacy, youth work in other institutions, youth arts and sports, etc.

... You're allowed to have your own mind ...



“... being allowed to choose whether you just want to sit in a corner with your friend on your phone and just sit there, do nothing all day. Or whether you want to get involved, talk to the workers, start planning ... You're allowed to have your own mind, you're not forced to go to one place and you have to act like everyone else.”

(Keishaun Decordova Johnson, 2013)

A free space... I can't explain it...



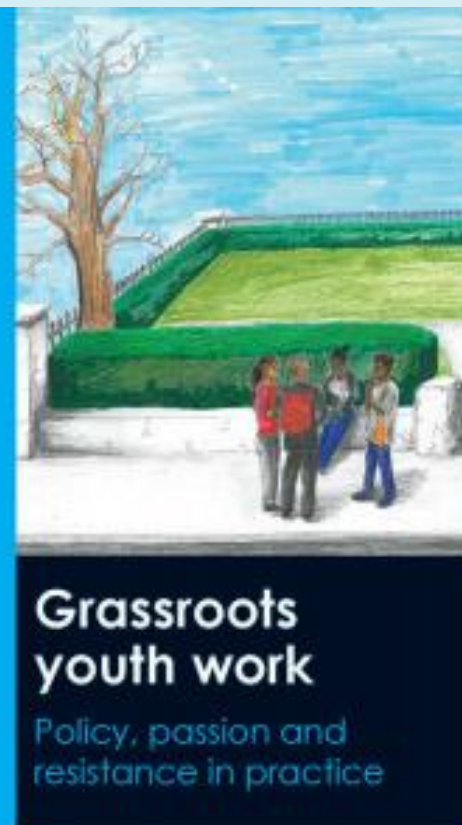
“It's a free space... It's not like school where you have to go and do set things. It's more relaxed, I guess. And there's more of a relationship between the young people and the youth workers... I can't explain it... It's quite spontaneous... Like you can kind of drop your worries, ish, if that makes sense. Just come here, and do something fun, chat with your friends, and have a debate...”

(Anna-Nina Koduah, 2013)

Study 1: Grassroots youth work (2011-14)

Part-time and volunteer youth workers:

- Were passionately committed, and emphasised their genuine care for the young people they work with.
- Wanted to be involved in decisions made about their work – yet often felt this didn't happen
- Wanted to work alongside experienced, supportive senior colleagues
- Were critical of target cultures and bureaucracy



Grassroots youth work

Policy, passion and resistance in practice

Tania de St Croix

Policy context (1990s - 2010s)



Neoliberalism – the global dominance of big business; the privatisation of public / voluntary services, and everyday life.

England: neoliberal youth work embedded at times of higher spending (1990s and 2000s), then exacerbated by cuts and closures post-2008:

- Marketisation
- Managerialism
- Securitisation and policing
- Under-valuing of grassroots practice

All disproportionately affecting low income, minoritised and/or marginalised communities.

Changing what it means to be a youth worker?



It's not as much my organisation being able to say, 'yeah that's really good work and actually this is quality work', it's a numbers game, and we have to meet what the funders' expectations are... I'm conflicted about it... I always try and make sure my work is, um, young people have ownership of it and they have options and they choose things, sometimes that isn't the case. And I'm aware of that.

(Mickie, part time youth worker, 2013)

Study 2: Rethinking impact, evaluation and accountability in youth work

A three-year study (2018-21) funded by ESRC, carried out with Louise Doherty, in partnership with youth organisations in England. Aimed to:

- Investigate if and how the youth impact agenda is shaping practice
- Understand the perspectives and experiences of young people, practitioners, managers, funders, and policy makers on:
 - The value of youth work
 - How youth work is evaluated
- Consider and share approaches to evaluation and accountability that are appropriate to youth work practice.

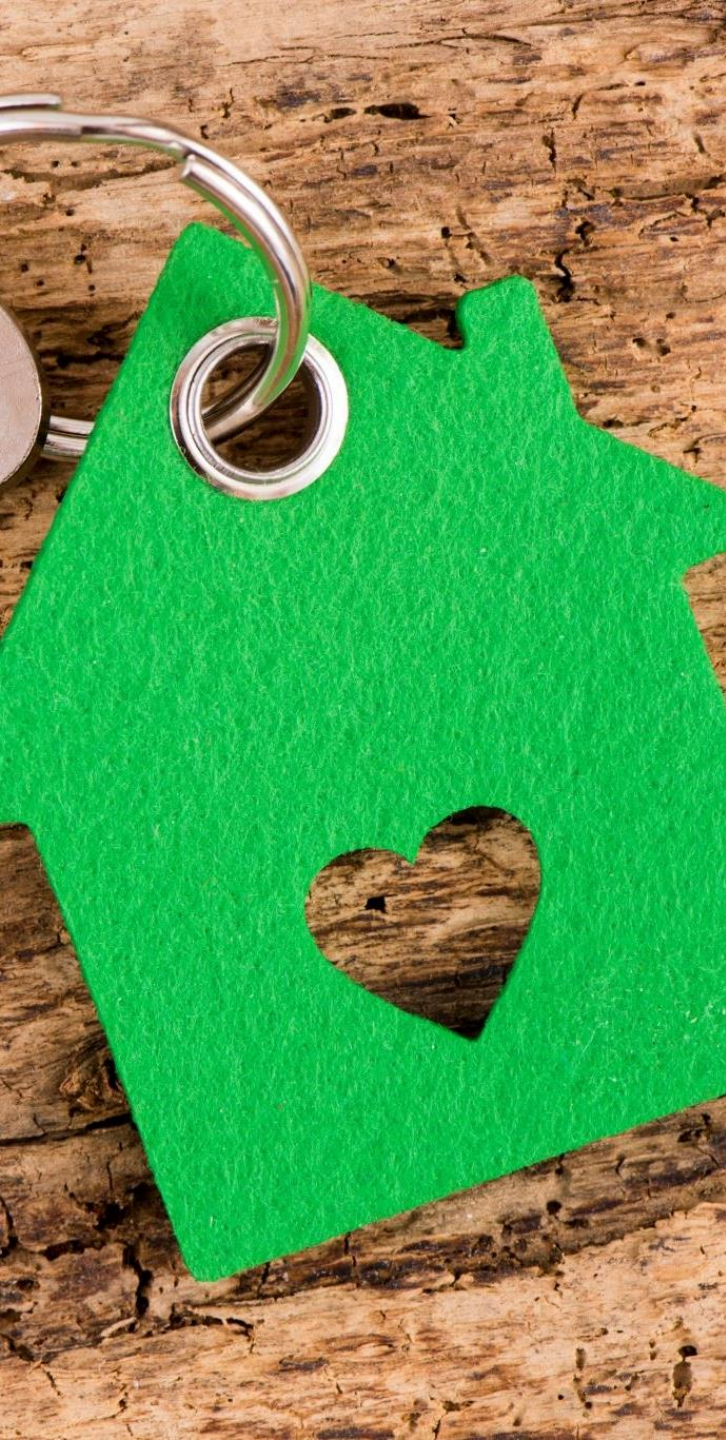
See also YouthREX's 'Beyond Measure: The State of Evaluation in Action in Ontario's Youth Sector' (Lovell, Anucha, Houwer & Galley, 2016)



Research organisations

- Eight organisations across England.
- Small youth clubs, larger youth services, multi-agency provision.
- Variety of settings: urban, rural, coastal.
- Variety of provision: charity, social enterprise, local government.
- Range of approaches: open access youth clubs, detached and outreach, young women's groups, trans and LGBT+ youth groups people, faith-based youth work, youth arts, youth participation.





Valuing youth work

It's quite like freeing in a way, because you know that there's always someone to talk to about things that you might not want to broach with your parents and friends and something, and you know that you've got a place to go that's just sort of completely separate from everyday life, so if you are having a bad day you know you can sort of leave it all behind and just have... Just a two hour break from just anything that's bothering you, and it makes you feel free about things.

(Tracey, young person, Riverpath)

I guess it's like a bridge, between all the different ages ... so at school you have like different years, like depending on your ages. And in youth club it's like from 11 to 19 year olds all in one space. Like socialising, which you wouldn't normally have at school. So it's like something different...

(Aurora, young person, Opal)



‘The value of youth work’

Short film made by:

- 22 young people
- 8 youth workers
- Mouth That Roars participatory youth film company





Celebrating, reflecting, resisting...

"... some young people, when we ask them those very reflective questions are quite aware of 'oh, you're gonna make me answer those damn questions!' But for me it's good to know that they know that we're kind of stretching their thinking and helping them critique things."

(Corey, youth worker, Dove St)

"I think it's a very creative way to do evaluation ... in that the questions are specific to what young people might be feeling or going through, but also that we create space for those conversations to take place, to have the evaluation done."

(Zayn, youth worker, Journeys)

"So, it's all really sensible. It's not like over-the-top, council-esque, super-paperwork that just kills us all off and takes the spark out of it."

"... there had been a long process where staff had definitely been involved in all of this stuff like what evaluation is necessary, why, what is unnecessary from what we've done before."

(Youth workers' focus group, Riverpath)



What counts as impact?

The lasagne story

“I think it’s just difficult to show like exactly what growth in each person looks like. I mean, the enjoyable things about youth work are like the small things. So, I made lasagne last week with the junior youth club we made it earlier in the day... and then we ate it later on in the house meeting. Three young people were like ‘Nah, I don’t like that. I don’t like cheese... I don’t eat this. I don’t eat this’... but three of them tried it who wouldn’t have normally, because the younger ones had made it. And those small things are big... The thing was, how do I record that?

... I know that trying lasagne to other people isn’t big. I thought, it is big for these young people. Like, it is big and ... I guess your knowledge of the young people is like how you know whether they’re changing or growing, but that’s really hard to write down sometimes, or really hard to reflect to funders.”

(Nicole , lead youth worker, Opal)

How policy has shaped youth work evaluation in England (and beyond?)

- **Austerity and cuts-** stark effects of over a decade of cuts particularly affect low income, working class, ethnically minoritized and rural youth services
- **The ‘youth impact agenda’-** a broad agreement amongst influential individuals and organisations that youth services must measure their impact, preferably by using quantitative techniques and validated psychology tools.
- Decision making based on **‘social value’** or **‘social return on investment’** (de St Croix, McGimpsey & Owen 2018)

(de St Croix & Doherty, [2022](#) – see QR code)






Challenges for young people

That's what school is for. The thing here is outside, you come to play pool or whatever, whatever. You don't come here to fill forms, you know? It's like – I'm not going there if they're gonna make me fill forms.

(Jasmine, young person, Fairlight Youth Centre)

... some days you don't really want to think about that question, and it can make you think too far into it, and then you can be left thinking about it for the rest of the day ... sometimes the things that it says on those questionnaires can actually give you ideas, instead of helping you.

(Luna, young person, Seaside)




Challenges for young people (continued)

It's invasive... I mean I get that question a lot, do you have a disability? ... and maybe you do but you don't wanna like disclose that, you know?... Questions can be asked that are a bit much. But then they should give you an option to be like you don't have to answer this if you don't want to. ...

Someone asked Ira if this was gonna give Journeys more money... and he said probably, and they were like right, give me it... Because they were like, this youth group means so much to me, I have to like do it, you know.

(Sabian, young person, Journeys.)



Challenges for youth workers

Not youth-centred

...young people don't want to fill out paper, they are like, 'why are we doing this?'

(Mel, youth worker, Melham)

Bureaucratic and burdensome


Yeah, so [council database] is like a swear word in the youth work world. ... you're gonna put them on this ridiculous database that takes fucking ages, and use a lot of your capacity which could be working with young people...

(Dawn, youth worker, Seaside)

Distracting, frustrating

It used to take up a really long time. And then it would be frustrating cause you wouldn't be able to be doing your youth work, but you'd be trying to evidence youth work that you didn't have time to do.

(Nora, youth worker, Riverpath)



Positive experiences of evaluation as reflection: young people's views

Dawn was up there and she was like ... 'what did you get out of this, and what did you get out of that, and how can we improve it for next year?' And blah de blah, blah blah. And it was great. And I feel like me, just in general, I get interviewed quite a lot at Seaside. Which I love, cos it's great.

(Delilah, young person, Seaside)

it's either rating from one to ten, and then if it's like comments or how it's helped you recently, and it's just nice to explain how it's helped. But even without questions a few times I've wrote how it's helped and I've even wrote like two pages. And then they've give it to the funding to show how much it's affected me ... I'm really proud of it.

(Chloe, young person, Dove St)



Challenges of evaluation and impact measurement

Some of the key themes we heard from young people and youth workers:

1. Often challenging, sometimes overwhelming
2. Could be intrusive and triggering
3. Wasn't always clear what the point was
4. Wasn't always clear who it was for or where it went



Celebrating, reflecting, resisting...

...there's got to be more funding put into it. I think that's a massive thing cause there's been that many cuts across the board within youth work. I mean youth service alone is like, non-existent, or very reduced, or becoming very targeted. I think there needs to be more opportunities for these smaller grassroots where you've got the projects, where they're probably not bringing in a lot of money.

(Yvonne, Vaults youth worker)

Stop cutting our bloody funding, thank you.

(Isaac, young person, Seaside)

...get from behind your desk and computer screen and come and look at it yourself, and then you'll realise that actually it has a massive impact on the lives of young people

(Joel, volunteer, Seaside)



Resistance **and** reflection: what are we celebrating and defending?

The youth work paradox (Baldrige 2020):

- Potential sites of liberation
- Sites of containment and ‘fixing’

Is there an evaluation paradox?

- Critical reflection on practice, centring young people’s perspectives, community accountability, professional accountability.
- Surveillance, reductive, disciplining, narrowing what ‘counts’ as good practice, reconfiguring what kinds of work are funded (and what are not).

Everyday resistance to everyday power (Ball, 2013, p.148)

- Counter-discourses
- Refusals and rebellion
- Creating alternatives



Counter-discourses



“I had to show what opportunities we give young people. I gave a few examples of concrete things we give them, very concrete tangible things. And then I said, 'But the most important things are the things you can't touch,' and I made a massive emphasis on that because they're so obsessed with bloody targets. So then I sort of made, from the concrete ones, which untangible ones come out of that. And then some comments from the young people.”

(Laura, part-time youth worker, 2013)

Refusals and rebellion

“The young people made a campaign and we supported that ... I think it's about an ethos and a principle of respecting young people's details and not seeing their information as currency to get funding... The staff and volunteers are not threatened, are not gonna be pushed over... Your threatening my job doesn't make my principles, or the principles of this place, any different... I think it's partly just because of the kind of the general vibe of the place but also there was a lot of support from a lot of people.”

(Mickie, part-time youth worker, LGBTQ youth group)




Creating alternatives



“Because we see these things all the time and we see so much bad practice... we want to show that there can be a good organisation there that really cares about young people. We're not all about, you know, money and targets, like other organisations are.”

(Keiron, 2013)




Thinking celebration, reflection and resistance together

Under what conditions is effective, anti-oppressive practice most likely to thrive?

1. Long-term investment in youth work's core costs
2. A relational, flexible, trusting approach to resourcing
3. Re-centring critically reflective practice
4. Inclusive, democratic, non-bureaucratic practice that values the experiences and perspectives of young people, and the expertise of frontline youth workers






Closing thoughts: celebrating, reflecting, resisting

- Taking a youth-centred, practice-informed approach means:
 - Paying critical attention to the policy and politics of youth work
 - Foregrounding the unequal and oppressive context in which young people - and practitioners - live their lives
- Being aware of policy / politics / structural context, discussing the dilemmas and tensions, and working collectively with young people and colleagues for change.

Thank you!

Info and contact: www.RethinkingImpact.com





Evaluation methods recommended by youth workers and young people

- **Group conversation (spontaneous / deliberate; informal / structured).**
- **Flipchart sheets with questions, post-its, coloured pens.**
- **Video / audio / photography (diaries, Vox pops, snapshots).**
- **Activities to answer scale / rating questions (e.g. balls in buckets).**
- **Human thermometer (hands indicate level of enthusiasm / agreement).**
- **Anonymous suggestion box.**
- **'Speed-dating' conversations between young people and funders.**
- **Storytelling.**
- **Simple questionnaires or forms (used flexibly, with discussion).**
- **Staff debriefs and reflection.**