Capturing the magic?

Rethinking impact, evaluation and accountability in youth work

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**Thought leadership forum**

Why 'capturing the magic'?

- Youth work's informal and youth-centred nature raises challenges for impact measurement.

- A wider context of inequalities, and the neoliberal restructuring of services.

- 'Capturing the magic' evokes the challenges and potential joys of evaluating youth work.

- What do we miss when we focus on what is measurable?

- What are the consequences of a narrow view of what counts as evidence, or disproportionate demands for proof?

Can the magic happen in evaluation, too?

Capturing the magic: Grassroots perspectives on evaluating youth work (de St Croix and Doherty 2023)
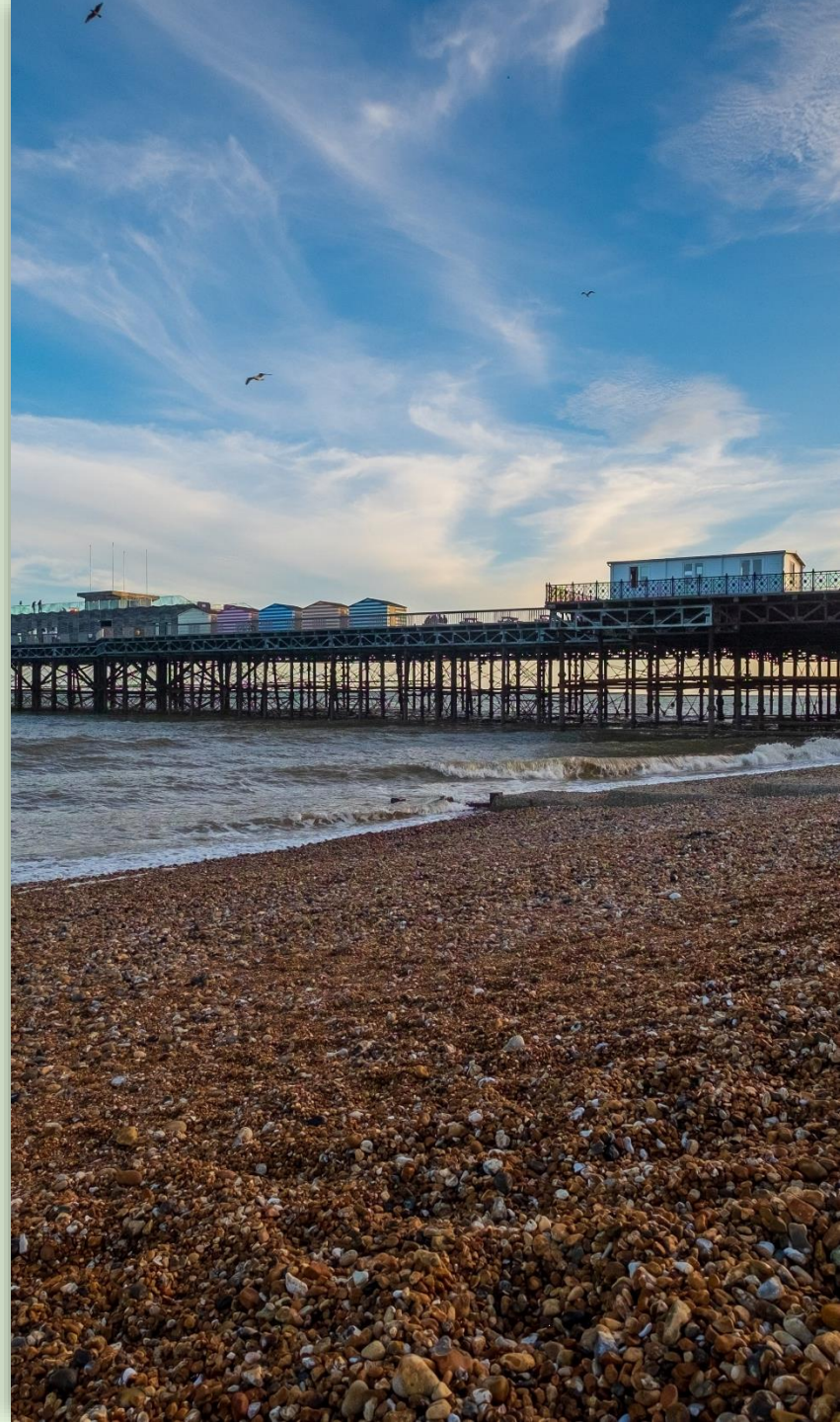
Rethinking impact, evaluation and accountability in youth work

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)

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.

Three-year qualitative study, including:

87 — **Interviews & Focus Groups**

143 — **Research participants**
- **58** young people
- **59** youth workers and managers
- **26** policy makers and influencers

73 — **Participant Observation**
- **63** in youth work settings
- **10** in policy settings

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.

'The value of youth work'

Short film made by:

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

How policy has shaped youth work evaluation in England

- **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 & Doherty, 2022 – see QR code)

Challenges of evaluation and impact measurement

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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

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 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)

Key findings:
1. **Young people highly valued youth work and their relationships with youth workers and were articulate in expressing this value.**

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 a two hour break from … 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, I don't know, it's like cool to see … it's a like a reminder that when you're with younger people they always remind you of school and how you were and how it's different now and stuff like that.

(Aurora, young person, Opal)

Key findings:
2. Young people felt that evaluation in youth work should suit the informal setting, be meaningful and informal.

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)

Key findings:
3. Young people felt ambivalent about impact measurement in youth work and that it should be unobtrusive, sensitive and avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes, if necessary or used at all.

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.)

Key findings
4. Frontline youth workers emphasised that evaluation needs to be suitable for the distinctive setting of youth work.

… 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, whether in smaller groups, or with workers, or in a big group.

(Zayn, youth worker, Journeys)

A young person's actually said they would prefer to be able to take an evaluation home, go and do it at home and then bring it back, so they have that time to reflect and think because they feel rushed when they're doing it in session.

(Yvonne, youth worker, The Vaults)

Key findings
5. The impact and evaluation processes currently undertaken in youth work settings are many and varied, partly due to a valuable diversity of practice approaches and contexts.

Because everyone learns differently, everyone is unique, everyone is never the same [...] so someone may have additional needs, may see a piece of paper with a couple of questions on, and that may freak them out, but if we do it as an exercise and we do it as an activity it becomes more fun, it becomes more inviting [...] And obviously as a youth worker you don't judge, like I say everyone is unique, everyone is never the same, I just kind of want it to be interactive for everyone and no-one feels pressured.

(Mel, youth worker, Melham)

Key findings

6. Youth workers and young people felt that policy should more robustly support the development of open youth work through funding and by building a wider understanding of the value of open youth work

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…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)

Policy perspectives: Resources

"If you're applying for the same amount but through five different funders you are going to have to get five different bits of information and you're going to have to put it in five different forms. So there's a lot of excess work... the shift towards maybe short-term funding over long-term funding means the programme design is different and organisations are having to redesign programmes to slightly different metrics of success..."

(Policy Manager, London Youth)

Policy perspectives: looking for the holy grail?

"Perhaps there was a view that there was something very straightforward that would help unlock funding... the government has done some learning, everybody's done some learning."

(Head of Policy, Local Youth Services, UK government)

'Thoughts on the holy grail', Bethia McNeil, 2016:

"There has been, for some time, a sense that if only we could collectively prove – or at least demonstrate beyond reasonable doubt – that youth work achieves social good, then a battle would have been won, and the spoils of war would follow. ...This is a seductive notion, and one that I have myself been attracted to on occasion...

Much of the research that has been done in attempt to 'prove' impact has been called into question, either because the method has not stood up to scrutiny, or because the results were impossible to replicate a second time, or because the research took too narrow a view in an attempt to prove a particular point. Such research or evaluation is never neutral, and there will always be disagreements about what constitutes evidence, or 'good evidence' or even a 'positive outcome'."

Policy perspectives: from prove to improve

"from the beginning NPC has been associated with the impact agenda… Now I would say that we've moved away from being so dogmatic about that… We've moved away from prove towards improve… it actually proved very difficult to prove, and it could cause problems… So we still push it, we still push data and evidence, but we don't push impact so much."

(James Noble, Impact measurement lead, NPC)

Policy perspectives: Learning internationally

"we have these really impact driven programmes over here, and we've got many unconnected kids over here, there's no bridge between the two... it's completely gone, it's washed out... you leave kids with no place to go, and you criminalise normal behaviour... we don't have anything to measure, how are we measuring impact if we don't have a programme? And to some extent I think the drive towards impact measurement has resulted in programmes that are measurable, as opposed to programmes that really meet the young people."

(Community Leader, New York.)

Policy perspectives: Who makes policy?

"… how can we make sure that actually we were balancing out the power, not only for the young people, but for the youth workers that are doing the ground work? … [are] there inequalities in how we capture data? And what does that look like for people who can't adhere to the same kind of norm? And who created the norms?"

"There are things that need to change systemically … ideally we would have youth policy makers that are connected to the groundwork … someone that has lived experience, and someone that, you know, kind of really dismantling the structure and the process of who is a policymaker." (Milka Fisiha, co-founder, Equal Equity)

Supporting democratic evaluation practice:

Questions for decision-makers

How can evaluation suit the setting?

- Informal; appropriate for practice; flexible; proportionate to resource provided.

How can evaluation challenge unequal power relations?

- Bearing in mind marginalized young people's experiences of questioning and surveillance; and the differential resourcing of organisations.

How can evaluation capture the intrinsic, everyday value of youth work, as well as its life-changing impact?

- May need different approaches in relation to 'ordinary' everyday youth work (which should be there by right) and remarkable stories (individual, group, community).

Closing thoughts

Under what conditions is effective practice with young people 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, as well as the expertise of frontline youth workers.

Thank you!

Info and contact: www.RethinkingImpact.com

Thank you!

Keep in touch:

Find out more about our research **Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work:** rethinkingimpact.com.

Join our occasional mailing list here for news on events and publications.

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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.**