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Are you for real? Investigating authenticity in community-based youth work practice

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ABSTRACT

Community-based youth workers are tasked increasingly to balance delivery of key policy priorities, whilst supporting young people to manage issues in their day-to-day lives. Contemporary practice is often marked by an increasing emphasis on delivery and measurement of predetermined outcomes and targeted provision. Practitioner boundaries have become unclear, challenging the nature of their relationships with young people. The interaction between youth workers and young people is characterised by levels of trust, respect, sincerity and above all authenticity. The notion of authenticity has been utilised to study teaching practice in schools and universities. We extend this work to examine the identity, role and purpose of youth work. The discussion draws on data from interviews with practitioners focused on the impact of their response to the issues faced by young people. Importantly, the findings point to authenticity as a new and valuable dimension or analysis and development of youth work practice.

Introduction

Building effective and meaningful relationships are central to youth work. In principle, practitioners work alongside young people, with the educational focus firmly placed on issues of interest and concern to them. The interaction and relationship between adult practitioners and young people are mediated by principles of trust, respect, sincerity and above all, authenticity. Over recent years, we have witnessed a wave of academic research, analysis and commentary focused on the authenticity of teachers in the formal education settings of schools and universities. (Brook 2009; Carusetta and Cranton 2005; Kreber 2010, 2013). The existing evidence is significant, but a broader understanding of authenticity in informal education settings has received much more limited attention to date. Several authors have highlighted the authenticity of youth work practitioners as an important quality to cultivate in practice, (e.g. de St Croix 2016; Ord 2016; Smith 2010). However, what it actually is, or looks like, is underdeveloped.

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Through building understanding of authenticity in the youth work context the findings of our work provides an important and new dimension for analysis and development of practice.

In writing this paper we are not concerned with redefining youth work nor do we offer an alternative typology of practice. Many important examples of such work already exist (Jeffs and Smith 2010; Cooper 2012; Smith 2013; Wylie 2015; Cooper 2018a). Rather, we take a critical look at contemporary practice by deploying an alternative theoretical lens in this domain of professional practice, namely authenticity. We pay heed to the advice of Coburn and Wallace (2011) who argue there is a 'need to theorise youth work outside of existing discourses' (98). Our aim is to shed light on some of the challenges faced by contemporary youth work practitioners, and offer analysis, insights, and raise questions for consideration as the sector moves forward. At this time, such an analysis is both urgent and important due to the ever-changing demands on practitioners and growing financial constraints faced by the sector. The issues explored and findings presented addresses a key gap in the theoretical perspectives of youth work and points to new possibilities for development of policy and practice.

We begin by discussing the concept of authenticity as described and developed in relation to formal education. We then move on to a synthesised review of literature pertaining to the respective themes of authenticity and youth work practice. We follow this with a description and analysis of research data that has informed our paper; from a small-scale study undertaken with community-based youth work practitioners working in an inner-city neighbourhood within a major city in Scotland. Finally, we assess the extent to which youth workers are encouraged and able to be authentic in the complex and often-contradictory context for contemporary practice. We found evidence to support the use of authenticity as a platform for reflection, evaluation and development of practice and a theoretical focus for academic research and vocational training. Drawing on the work of Cranton and Carusetta (2004a) as a lens for analysis, we present a framework that summarises the dimensions of authenticity in youth work practice. This comprises four discrete yet interrelated dimensions of relationship, awareness, context and critical reflection which provides a structure for the discussion that follows. Our recommendations respond to the desire and apparent struggle to achieve authenticity in youth work practice, a phenomenon shared across many countries (Fusco et al. 2018). The issues considered and findings presented bring new insight to youth work practice and will undoubtedly be of interest beyond the Scottish context.

Authenticity: a multifaceted concept

In contextualising this paper we were drawn to the earlier work of Cranton and Carusetta (2004a), who define authenticity as 'a multifaceted concept that includes at least four parts: being genuine, showing consistency between values and actions, relating to others in such a way as to encourage their authenticity, and living a critical life' (7). Across the broader literature defining authenticity in an educational context, we identified the key relational foundation of the encounter; one of respect, honesty, integrity and genuineness (Frego 2006; Kreber et al. 2007; Carusetta and Cranton 2005). We think this is important for the practice of youth work, rooted as it is in informal education, where a learning relationship is built through dialogue; a dialogue that the educator

brings their genuine, authentic self to. Allied to this, is the helpful idea of self-actualisation, what Baxter Magolda (2009) terms 'self-authorship'. In other words, key to the authentic educator is working alongside learners to enable them to understand and take control of their own lives (Kreber et al. 2007). It is not enough for educators to have a deep understanding of the issues their students face, they must also be able to communicate effectively to learners why it matters to *them*. Dialogue, again, is critical here, as it is only in the relational interplay of shared understanding that we can truly realise our authentic selves (Malm 2008). As Grabowski and Rasmussen (2014) state, 'viewed in this way authenticity is achieved when a person or a group of persons can apply information or activities to their own everyday lives in a meaningful way' (87). Without understanding the structural forces that shape the lives of learners, any educational endeavour is potentially doomed to irrelevance. As such, educators need to be critically alert to the forces at play and reflective of the impact on students and the nature and purpose of their practice intervention. We found Kreber's (2013) work useful in emphasising there is also a need for a more politicised form of critical reflection whereby 'moving towards greater authenticity is not exclusively a matter of engaging in ideology critique; however, there is no truly 'authentic being' without considering how consciousness is affected by social situation, and thus relations of power' (142). Cranton (2001) agrees, suggesting that a key component of living an authentic life is being able to express one's genuine self in the community and wider society, understanding the relational aspect of authenticity, one that moves beyond a more narcissistic conceptualisation. Educators are required to cultivate critical reflection *and* critical self-reflection in students – understanding themselves but also their place within wider social issues; 'students coming into their authenticity understand themselves as members of a wider social community … towards which they feel a commitment and responsibility' (Cranton and Carusetta 2004a, 54). The social context influences who we are, so there can be no understanding of the self without understanding it (Cranton and Carusetta 2004b).

For this paper, the question we sought to address was; in what ways does the notion of authenticity have relevance to youth work practitioners working with young people? To contextualise this investigation, we engaged with existing literature and evidence pertaining to the youth work sector, with an emphasis on contemporary challenges for practice and the potential role of authenticity as a lens to help build new understanding.

Literature review: youth work and authenticity

Whilst sharing many features of Youth work across the UK, Europe and beyond, the practice sector in Scotland has a discrete history, with origins in the nineteenth century (Sercombe et al. 2014). Over the past 2 decades, the youth work sector in Scotland has been profoundly shaped by the rapidly evolving political landscape (Fyfe and Moir 2013). Following the re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1998, change across the policy terrain concerned with children and young people has been unrelenting. Yet, the Scottish Government has remained steadfast in their policy commitment to the role of youth work as a core vehicle for improving the lives of young Scots (Scottish Executive 2007; Youthlink Scotland 2018).

The professional activities of the modern-day youth work practitioner are informed by national occupational standards, values, ethics and competences (CLD 2021a). Formed in

2008, The *Community Learning and Development (CLD) Standards Council Scotland* is the body that supports professional CLD practitioners in Scotland, including youth workers (CLD 2021b). Practitioners are tasked to ensure that their work supports social change and social justice and is based on the values of inclusion, empowerment, working collaboratively and promotion of learning as a lifelong activity (CLD 2018a). The competence framework of the CLD Standards Council also provides the template for teaching and assessment on the university programmes preparing students to enter the professional ranks. The practitioners engaged in this study are all graduates from such a degree programme.

The youth work sector in Scotland and beyond is diverse in terms of setting, approaches, goals and resources. Typically, services are situated in local neighbourhoods, many experiencing the trappings of poverty, within purpose-built centres and provided by a range of voluntary, uniformed, public sector, social enterprise, private, charitable and faith-based organisations. The workforce relies heavily on volunteer and sessional staff working alongside, and supported by, professionally qualified CLD practitioners. Coburn and Wallace (2011) summarise the aim of youth work in Scotland is to 'enhance young people's rights through programmes that help to advance their social, educational and welfare capacities and cross boundaries between community, statutory and voluntary sectors' (2). From a recent international review of definitional terms, Cooper (2018) concluded that 'there is no universally agreed definition of the term youth work' (2). However, she outlined four common features that typify practice: it must build from where young people are; the relationship between the young person and youth worker is central; young people and youth workers are active partners in a learning process; it engages with young people within their communities (3). These features capture the central definitional terms for youth work in Scotland, enshrined in an agreed Statement on the Nature and Purpose of Youth Work (Youthlink Scotland, 2014) with the added important caveat that 'young people choose to participate' (4).

The professional sector in Scotland and indeed across many other countries has experienced significant change, with practitioners tasked increasingly to deliver key policy imperatives in local community-settings (Fyfe and Moir 2013; McGregor 2015; Miller et al. 2015). The impact of their intervention is now often gauged against pre-determined success criteria that reflect the demands of funding bodies or government to the potential detriment of prioritising issues faced by young people themselves. This perceived disconnect between the mission and defined purpose of youth work is an international concern, and positions practitioners in conflict with their own professional values and principles and potentially the stated goals of their employer. Moreover, many practitioners find themselves engaged in modes of practice previously deemed the responsibility of other professionals (Bradford and Cullen 2014; Dunne et al. 2014; Seal and Andersson 2017). As Williamson (2017) observes, 'conceptually, too often, youth work is routinely defined in terms of what it is not rather than articulating more precisely what it is' (171). Increasingly, professional boundaries become blurred. One such example in the Scottish sector is an emphasis on developing employability skills with young people; a situation pertinent to the study discussed here.

So, in what ways does authenticity feature in youth work practice? The development of personal relationships is commonly foregrounded as the primary rationale of the work. As Blacker (2010) outlines, for a voluntary relationship to develop, 'characteristics such as

trust, talking and listening, doing things together, acceptance, respect and building rapport are important, as is showing care and upholding obligation towards each other' (24). For Cooper (2018), genuine, respectful and authentic relationships, sits alongside trust as well as open and honest dialogue as essential features of the youth work process. The informal voluntary relationship is steered by the objective of equality and safeguarded by mutuality between practitioner and young person. Within this context, the personal and professional qualities of the youth worker comes under the spotlight. As Smith (2010) explains; 'you need to be who you say you are and your actions need to complement your claim. In other words, you need to be authentic' (38). Referring to the related field of social pedagogy, Slovenko and Thompson (2016) propose that practitioners make use of their personality to be authentic in the relationship. However, they stress this may provoke fundamental philosophical questions 'concerning how they think about others, what kind of relationships they want to have with others and what might be considered to be a life lived well' (14). Such critical self-reflection is key to the development of authentic youth work relationships.

The nascent themes in academic literature concerned with the nature and purpose of contemporary youth work practice, appear to resonate clearly with notions of authenticity. Ingram and Harris (2013), argue 'youth workers are justifiably proud of offering learning through the caring, equal relationships that they make with young people' (72). Smith (2002), encourages youth work practitioners to 'take personal responsibility to seek out the gift of authenticity' in the learning relationship being built with young people. Whilst youth workers often delineate clearly their role from more 'traditional' educators, such as teachers, there is evidence of commonality. As Thompson (2015) notes, authenticity is distinguished by a consistency, or congruence, between the educator's values, motivations and actions. Kreber (2013), makes the important point that 'the difference in power between teachers and students must not be denied' (52). The same is true of youth workers as informal educators, hence the commitment to engage learners in genuine dialogue, acknowledging the intersubjective nature of learning, where knowledge is mutually constructed and valuing the input of learners (Cooper 2018).

Are there limits to achieving authenticity in youth work practice? In many nation states, the contemporary sector has become imperilled by a creeping managerial regime of governance concerned with performativity and impact. de St Croix (2018) cautions, 'the dominance of pre-defined outcomes and numerical data could threaten the legitimacy – and even long-term survival – of an entire field of practice' (416). Consequently, the modern-day youth work practitioner can feel compromised and runs the risk of adopting and transmitting values that are antithetical to their own. As Kreber (2010) warns, such inauthenticity 'is often a matter of compliance with external expectations, although, over time, it can develop into complacency, whereby we do not even realise that we conform to external demands. Such a statement might then perhaps more accurately be referred to as *un*authenticity' (193). Bradford and Cullen (2014), conclude that 'youth work's liminality and plasticity, whilst being an asset in the past, has apparently weakened its position' (94). Thus, tensions resulting from the changing demands on the role and purpose of the community-based youth work practitioner may test or even undermine their professional authenticity. Looking internationally, Fusco et al. (2018) concluded that 'too often and in too many parts of the world today, youth workers are struggling to create or maintain an authentic and dynamic practice with young people shaped by

young people's experiences' (p.624). Despite the setting, the contextual requirements placed on practitioners will undoubtedly influence their ability to be authentic.

The following Table 1, is a summary of the leading themes across the literature reviewed. Drawing on the earlier work of Cranton and Carusetta (2004a), we have adapted their stated dimensions of authenticity and utilised these to summarise their potential relevance to the youth work literature. Through extending this work we offer a new conceptual framing as well as an aide-memoir for practitioners to consider the authentic nature of their work with young people.

The study and methodology

The data presented and discussed in this paper is drawn from a small-scale study investigating the experiences of seven youth workers located in an inner-city neighbourhood within a major city in Scotland. Table 2 shows the practitioners interviewed for this study.

As a key characteristic, the targeted participants had achieved a professional qualification awarded from one of the training programmes professionally approved by the Community Learning and Development Standards Council (CLD 2022). We were interested in practitioners with these qualifications in order to better explore the tension that exists between (a) training which prioritises the principles discussed in the literature review which underpin youth work, and (b) the current policy agenda which may or may not be creating tensions for the ability of the practitioners to remain authentic. Whilst the participants were not asked directly about their perspectives on authenticity, the themes of relationships, awareness of issues, context and reflection were discussed commonly across the cohort. Often, these themes arose in response to questions focused on training

Table 1. Synthesising the literature: Dimensions of authenticity in youth work practice.

Practice themes	Core practitioner attributes, knowledge and approaches
Relationship	• Develop a disposition of care for young people • Understand structures of social power (including self-power) • Strive for effective communication through genuine dialogue • Aspire to be open, honest and trustworthy
Awareness	• Awareness of young people's needs • Being interested in young people's broader lives and experiences • Self-awareness: Personal and Professional Characteristics
Context	• Knowledge of the Youth Work principles, practice and 'curriculum' • Knowledge of Community Context and Resources • Understanding the learning environment (informal/non-formal) • Recognise cultural and organisational expectations
Critical Reflection	• Checklist: Professional Values? Choices? Purpose? Ethics? • Interrogate Norms and Expectations • Generate new meaning and understanding • Know the learner

Adapted from Cranton and Carusetta (2004a).

Table 2. Participant profiles.

Pseudonym	Qualification	Focus of Youth Work Practice
Frank	BA Informal Education (Youth Work and CLD)	Health and well-being; Generic Youth Groups; School based group-work
Alice	BA (Hons) Community Education	Befriending; School-based group-work
Will	BA (Hons) Community Education	Generic Youth Groups; School-based group-work
Anna	BA (Hons) Community Education	Generic Youth Groups
Sarah	BA (Hons) Community Education	Employability Work; Generic Youth Group; School-based group-work
Ella	BA (Hons) Community Education	Employability Work; Generic Youth Group; School-based group-work
Catherine	BA (Hons) Community Education	Works exclusively with Sikh Young Women; School-based group-work

and the impact of the current policy agenda on the ability of the practitioners to remain true to their values and goals as CLD professionals.

This research was a qualitative empirical endeavour, fundamentally concerned with investigating the interface between individual experience, construction of meaning and broader societal processes; and theorising from these to generate explanations of these phenomena (Lewis and Ritchie 2003; Gläser and Laudel 2013). As the focus here was on illuminating the experience of the practitioners in relation to their work alongside young people, interviews were deemed the most appropriate method. The goal was to elucidate the interface between policy and practice, hence, semi-structured interviews were felt appropriate for this purpose (Denzin 1989; Byrne 2012). Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to investigate specific themes whilst at the same time allowing a degree of freedom in order that new insights can emerge (Bold 2012; Thomas 2013). Adopting a semi-structured approach provided space for the respondents to express their thoughts and perspectives on the issues discussed and maintained a 'natural' feel to the interview itself (Savin-Baden and Howell Major 2013). The interviews lasted around 90 min and were audio-recorded with the permission of participants. Though the interviews themselves did not explicitly discuss the concept of authenticity, the themes explored closely related to those outlined in Table 2. Responses focused on practitioners' own values, their perspectives on the purpose of youth work, the mission of their employing agencies and how they understood the purpose of their current role. Though the distinction between primary and secondary data can be blurred (Hughes and Tarrant 2020), particularly in a case such as ours (as we collected the original data), applying a different framework in order to analyse said data does not, in our view, overstep any ethical boundaries, nor preclude the analysis or subsequent conclusions from being scientifically robust. Our application of the concept of authenticity to this data is a consequence and development of our thinking as researchers and our response to practitioners such as those in this study.

Data was codified by looking for keywords and themes which emerged across the participant interviews. This was an iterative process which required a systematic approach when interrogating the data (Rapley 2011). These codes went through a continuous process of reflection and review as they were sorted into themes to extrapolate their salience in terms of authenticity. This study is aligned with the ethical guidelines set by the ESRC which funded the research.

Findings

As illustrated in Table 1 above, a synthesis of the themes garnered from the literature provides a structure to explore and present the findings from our analysis of the data; namely, relationships, awareness, context and critical reflection.

Relationships

The relationship between an adult practitioner and a young person is fundamental to youth work practice. For Ord (2016), 'youth workers aim to establish and build authentic relationships' with young people' (78). From the interviews, a commitment to developing meaningful relationships was tangible. As Sarah explains:

> I think the relationships are really, really important, if you don't have relationships with the young people it's very hard to try and get them to that next stage. I've always been one for trying to help … talking to them, having good rapport, and young people say they can talk to me easily.

Principally, if the practitioner is not able to begin working with young people at their pace, allowing for a relationship-building phase, then the likelihood of them discussing the important issues in their life will be hampered. This point was also raised by Anna:

> just building relationships with them so they actually trust you to help them through these things … trust, a lot of these young people it's non-existent because they've been let down so much in the past

The craft of relationship-building takes time, particularly with marginalised young people. Anna's desire to foster relationships cannot be questioned, but without adequate time and resource could very well be compromised.

Despite the pressures of a changing policy environment, the youth workers interviewed maintained a deep and passionate commitment to working with young people. A vital driver was their own previous experiences of youth work as participants, and the difference it made in their lives growing up. As Catherine reflected:

> I was brought up in [City], life was really, really challenging and youth work, having these places to go I really saw the value in, and places that are safe and being around other people it was something that was really beneficial for me … I'd love to change the world, but, I want to improve people's lives or help people to improve their lives.

Research undertaken by de St Croix (2016) confirmed that youth workers 'wish to make a genuine difference to young people's lives; this was not presented as coming from an outside 'do-gooder' position but as rooted in personal experience' (57). This sentiment was identifiable amongst the practitioners interviewed. However, Sarah and Ella discussed how the dynamic of the current employability agenda has affected their relationships with young people. Ella described the dilemma presented by the introduction of the Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA). As one of the employability 'hubs' in the city, her project is responsible for monitoring the attendance of those young people on an Activity Agreement.[1] They must report whether the young people are fulfilling the hours necessary each week (a minimum of 4hrs) to qualify for their EMA.[2] For Sarah this undermines the foundational 'voluntary principle':

with the employability focus … I think there is a pressure on young people to be doing something to get their EMA … that's another change in my role, it used to be very voluntary, people would come and see you if they wanted to come.

Ella elaborated, suggesting that the dynamic of the EMA undermined her ability to develop a relationship based on mutuality. Like Sarah, she noted a shift in the youth work relationship resembling a child/parent rather than one of partnership. She argued:

To me it's not youth work, paying young people … It makes you more like a nagging Mum, aye you do just feel like you're nagging them and it's not what youth work is all about.

Wrestling with the contrast between the relationship building that is central to youth work and the move to feeling like a 'nagging mum' is obviously problematic and leads Ella to question the nature and purpose of her practice intervention. Cooper (2018) forewarns youth workers 'starting a relationship with the end in sight has implications for building authentic relationships' which, in turn, 'may cause youth workers to question their actions in relation to professional values' (42). For the youth workers interviewed, maintaining autonomy and capacity to foster authentic relationships is proving *increasingly* difficult due to the predetermined outcomes associated with employability-oriented practice.

Awareness

Youth work in Scotland and elsewhere, is distinguished from other forms of educational practice by its commitment to starting where young people are at, rather than from predetermined learning outcomes. Therefore, as well as being given the time to nurture trusting relationships, practitioners are required to be well-versed about contemporary youth issues. The likelihood of developing an informal curriculum shaped by the interests and aspirations of young people is brought into question. Catherine, for example, discussed 'forcing' young people to fulfil the learning outcomes of an accredited award programme rather than supporting open-access youth work:

When you're dealing with issues like arranged marriages you do need somewhere where you can come and I don't think that is something that we have, and I think for young people that is something that is under-estimated how important that is. And more informal work … not forcing people into doing programmes that they don't want to do. While we were doing [the award programme], I think I was working with 40 young people and about 5% of them wanted to do it.

Catherine contrasted this with the work that she felt the organisation should be doing, that is practice intervention informed by the expressed needs of the young women with whom she works; not only providing a space for them simply to *be,* but addressing the complex gender-related issues that loomed large in the lives of those accessing their service. In terms of authenticity, Catherine had awareness of the young people's needs and was interested in their broader lives and experiences. However, her capacity to tailor her practice accordingly was limited by the broader context, specifically the requirement to align outcomes of youth work with a generic accreditation framework.

Context: resources

A major issue for these youth workers was a lack of available resources to support a meaningful response to the gamut of socio-economic issues faced by the young people with

whom they worked. For example, when asked if the work she undertook addresses issues of social justice affecting young people, Anna felt unable to do so. She explains:

> the only way you could really do social justice work with young people is just to say, right, poverty's an issue for you, let's all turn up and do a project on it, right? But then it's like, you can't do that anymore because, we've not got the time, we've not got the resources, and, to apply for funding for that … , you may as well be trying to swim the blooming channel or something, there's too many specific targets that you have to fit, it's a joke, really.

The pre-determined targets and outcomes attached to available finance appears to stifle the possibility to honour the core CLD practice principle of starting where young people are at. This hinders capacity to address issues beyond those related to funding streams.

Across the sector, sources of funding have become highly capricious and competitive. Common to all the practitioners interviewed is the pervasive need to secure finance to support their work. This is time-consuming and detracted from the core business of engaging with young people. Moreover, the competition for increasingly dwindling funds was a source of frustration. As Catherine described:

> We never got a funding application that we applied for, we're running on our bare bones to be honest, we've got one group running at the moment and that's it, so it's my job to get things up and running with no staff.

Such scenarios are not exclusive to the projects participating in this research with the ongoing decimation of youth services across the UK due to austerity measures. Yet, the reduced funding appears to compel practitioners to work beyond their contracted hours in order to meet the needs and demands of the young people they serve. Ella talked of the additional hours required to deliver the level and quality of service needed and planned, for her this equated to doing 'the work of one and a half people'. A situation de St Croix (2016) terms the 'exploitation of emotional labour' whereby; 'youth workers' passion for their work encourages them to go along with policies against their principles in order to preserve their job and keep services open for young people' (p16). This was certainly the case here, too. As Anna stated:

> It's hard because, in this field, everyone used to say if you ever went into the [Local Government Youth Service] you'd have stability, but that's all gone … I don't think there will ever be that much stability, it'll probably just be year by year and that's quite scary

The stringent reduction in funds and the complex demands on an increasingly precarious sector are preventing these workers from responding authentically in their practice, particularly in addressing injustice in the lives of the young people.

Context: demonstrating impact of practice

Allied to financial constraints, is the pressure on practitioners to provide evidence of the work they do with young people. The influence of the managerialist agenda is ubiquitous across the sector and felt strongly, with outcome measures and competitive funding compromising the character of youth work. The issue of targets and outcome measures was a source of frustration for the practitioners, whereby prescriptive targets inhibited their ability to respond authentically to the immediate needs of young people.

This is not a new situation, nor is it exclusive to the sector in Scotland. The extensive economic instability of the past decade has created a fragmented and complex array of available source funds to support youth work. The specific nature and demands of this context are captured by Sarah:

> it's more like a jigsaw puzzle so there's lots more of different, smaller funders, three different funders funding one project, but all of those have different outcomes and different targets, so you're doing, you're working with the same people, doing the same job, but having to hit different targets for the different funders and that is, it can get really, really tricky and it's a lot of stress.

Funding has become increasingly ad hoc with the result that the practitioners find themselves spending more time pursuing resources and justifying their use. This contradictory position further undermines the potential for authentic practice as youth workers manage what Darking et al. (2016) term 'community data burden.'

Context: the employability agenda

Over the past decade, the role of youth work in Scotland has become firmly tasked with supporting young people to develop skills geared towards future employment. Consequently, the related language of 'positive destinations' has become in Scottish policy and practice. Williamson (2017) argues that youth work faces competing demands to meet the individual and collective needs of young people whilst remaining subordinate to delivering the broad obligations of policy; the resultant tensions and contradictions 'are endemic to youth work' (177). For practitioners in Scotland, a major plank of their work is ensuring young people are engaged in some form of formal post-school activity. For Alice, the language of positive destinations frames her practice, despite questioning the logic behind it:

> we do laugh when we say the words positive destinations, 'cos it's just one of those buzz words that are chucked about, what does it really mean? … *laughs* … is it really positive for sign-posting someone, not really, they might still be in the same place that they were, but you get to count that as positive 'cos you've sign-posted them. And just because you think it's positive how do you know the young person thinks it's positive … it's the language that is drummed into us.

Fairclough (2001), refers to 'discourse driven' social change, where language takes on an increasing importance, prompting 'more conscious attempts to shape it and control it to meet institutional or organisational objectives' (p231). Language is seen as a form of social practice and in this sense is far from neutral, being as it is, fashioned by institutions and social structures whilst shaping them in return. Remaining authentic to the needs and goals of young people in this context is undeniably demanding. Sarah expressed her frustration:

> 16+ positive destinations, that's all everyone is obsessed about - the destination and it's not really the journey that's important anymore.

Furthermore, Sarah felt that the positive destination agenda was now driving her work:

> There's a lot of depression, social anxiety, personality disorder, from a small group of young people there's a heck of a lot of issues and you need to be dealing with that before you can

force them into the world of work, it just seems, like … you're just going to fail them if you
don't try and deal with these issues or don't try to support them as best you can before chuck-
ing them into the fire pit.

Sarah has to prioritise and demonstrate achieving positive destinations, rather than being
able to authentically address underlying issues which may in effect be working to margin-
alise young people from the labour market. Practitioners are potentially propelling some
young people into the 'fire pit' rather than responding to their stated learning interests
and development needs. Far from supporting young people to progress in the labour
market, they felt complicit in perpetuating 'the churn', in other words pressuring them
to take up labour market opportunities that will prove difficult to progress beyond (Shil-
drick, MacDonald, and Webster 2012). This is a finding exposed in other research under-
taken across the UK (Simmons and Smyth 2016; Wenham 2017).

Critical reflection

Kreber et al. (2007), stress that educators need to reflect carefully upon *what* is being
taught and ask *why* does it matter to the learners? Despite the challenging context sur-
rounding the contemporary youth work sector in Scotland, these practitioners strive to
find time and space to reflect on their practice. The CLD Standards Council (CLD 2018),
recognise reflective practice as a key attribute whereby practitioners integrate their
knowledge, skills, values and attitudes with their experience and use self-assessment, par-
ticipative processes and evidence of impact to help plan and manage activities and ident-
ify learning and development needs. Ella described such an approach:

> then we catch ourselves and have a chat and then we step back and say 'right, what are we
> doing here?' … And we sort of reset it again … the way in which we're reporting back to the
> funders for the employability specific stuff … isn't well matched with the way we want to
> work so it's like a constant process of us trying to remind ourselves … no, if this is what
> works and we know what works and this is the way we want to work.

To maintain authenticity requires tenacity and clarity of purpose. Wylie (2015) argues that
'good youth workers think about their practice and take responsibility for becoming
better at it' (51). To best understand and communicate the authentic realities of youth
work requires a more expansive reflection. The current dominance of the employability
agenda demands that practitioners are clear about what matters to young people.
Across local neighbourhoods, the responsive mission of community-based youth work
services must prioritise their respective needs. Returning to Ella:

> we need to do it this way and then make it work for reporting back to the funders, not lying to
> them, it's our process and it's our responsibility to fight for that, you know … being more
> clever about it … we need to be more protective over our skills as youth workers to do the
> bits we're good at.

Being clever about describing practice outcomes does not imply a lack of integrity, rather it
confirms the ongoing need for practitioners to assert what they do best in a context that
often fails to recognise the unique contribution that youth workers make to the lives of
young people. Meaningful critical reflection is essential to ensure that youth workers do
not lose sight of their professional identity and purpose, as they are increasingly expected
to diversify and align their practice with overriding policy themes and related funding.

Conclusion

With this paper, we set out to explore the role and significance of authenticity in the context of community-based youth work practice. What we found was evidence that the youth workers participating in this study identified with common professional values that supported their collective commitment to addressing the expressed needs of young people. However, analysis of the data paints a picture of practitioners struggling to meet the distinct demands of policy, whilst striving to support young people to achieve their potential. One such challenge is the employability agenda that permeates all levels of practice. In this context, the sector has become compelled to provide target-driven evidence of practice outcomes to funding bodies. These youth workers, and others like them, now operate within a culture of performativity with impact of their practice judged against pre-determined measures. Whilst these have been a feature of practice for some time, there is a suggestion here that these demands are only increasing, further eroding the capacity of practitioners to respond to young people's immediate demands. The balance between reporting on practice often outweighs their time spent face-to-face with young people in communities; their inability to nurture meaningful relationships undermines the possibility of authentic youth work practice.

A crucial dimension of multifaceted authenticity for practitioners is to maintain and cultivate an awareness of what matters in the lives of the young people with whom they work. The participants in this study are striving to avoid subordination to the demands of policy and ensure their youth work services have capacity to be responsive to the conditions of young people's lives. The unfettered development of authentic relationships requires the practitioners to present their genuine selves. To be authentic also entails youth workers to be open and honest in communication with young people about their own purpose, principles and prejudices. Their ability to achieve this is determined somewhat by tensions inherent in the practice context that may predetermine the purpose and desired outcome of their intervention. Hence, youth workers need to be able to interrogate the role of power, not only in their relationships with young people, but also how particular ideas, practices and ideology gain legitimacy within wider society. It is vital for authentic practitioners to stay informed of what is important in the lives and lifestyles of those young people with whom they work. We believe that our analytical framework centring the concept of authenticity can provide a potent tool for reflection on these issues.

In striving to assist young people to achieve their potential and find their way in the world, the evidence gleaned from this study confirms the importance of fostering an enquiring spirit. Only by reflecting critically upon their experiences can young people begin to build understanding; the same is true for the youth workers themselves. The primacy of responding to the changing demands of policy and dedicated funding streams is leading CLD qualified youth workers to risk becoming inauthentic, through undermining the values, principles and actions that define their professional role. Ultimately, there is a perennial challenge for the respective training institutions and professional bodies such as the CLD Standards Council to ensure practitioners are aware of the tensions that competing priorities can create for them in their work. Thus ensuring authenticity through an ongoing process of questioning what it is they are doing, why they are doing it and to what ends.

Notes

1. Activity Agreement (AA) programmes are aimed at 'those young people whose immediate and future learning and skills needs have been assessed and it has been recognised that without this first step engagement and support, they would not make a successful transition toward and into further learning or training and ultimately employment' (Youthlink Scotland 2018, 1). These are individually tailored packages of learning, typically centred on building confidence, improving core skills and developing a plan for progression towards more formal employability programmes. Many AA programmes across Scotland are delivered by youth workers. As part of the AA, young people receive an EMA (see footnote ii) if they qualify for it and if they fulfil their agreed hours per week (hours vary from young person to young person depending on their programme of activities and their readiness to engage for more hours per week). For more information see: Youthlink Scotland (2018).
2. EMA is a fortnightly payment of £60 (£30 per week) paid directly to young people who have reached school leaving age, are aged 16-19, but are either; remaining in school; undertaking a full or part-time non-advanced course, in a college of further education or education centre; or, taking part in activity agreement programme. In order to qualify for this payment, parents or guardians cannot earn more than £24, 241 per year with one dependent child or £26, 884 with more than one dependent child (before tax). EMA is paid in addition to Child Benefit and other benefits.

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