

# Evidence and Impact **Essay Collection**

Questioning the youth  
impact agenda  
- Tania de St Croix

# Questioning the youth impact agenda



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**"If something is measured, then it can be compared"**

'Impact is the word of the moment', said the director of a youth charity I was catching up with recently. It seems to be true – impact is discussed almost everywhere I go, whether with enthusiasm, critique or a weary sense of 'yet another thing we need to think about'.

The ubiquitous emphasis on impact is no coincidence: it is a deliberate government policy agenda, implemented 'at a distance' by organisations such as the Centre for Youth Impact (set up and funded by the Cabinet Office). The new youth impact agenda is presented as common sense: after all, the argument goes, how can we claim to work in the interests of young people if we are not able to demonstrate the effect of our work?

Yet the impact agenda is not simply a benign intention to improve the evaluation of young people's services; rather, it is a key enabler in the intensification of market mechanisms in public services. Demonstrating impact (in the sense the word is used in current policy discourse) means gathering quantifiable data through tried and tested tools, using a positivist scientific method that recognises only what can be 'proven' to be true, linked to predefined outcomes through a 'theory of change' model. This logic is firmly connected to market and finance principles in an age of austerity. If something is measured, then it can be compared – both with other services (enabling privatisation and competition) and with the absence of a service (evidencing notional future financial savings).



Over the last thirty-five years, public services have been opened up to private sector involvement. New Labour regulated the diversified public service provision through the widespread imposition of bureaucratic targets. Overlapping with and sometimes replacing target cultures we now have a new phase of governance based on social investment. This has required new ways of measuring the effectiveness of provision, using the logic of financial markets to reward those who deliver services that are proven to save money further down the line. As Ian McGimpsey puts it:

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*“This requires youth services to demonstrate ‘return on investment’ through a credible (in policy terms) ‘theory of change’. Statutory funding is increasingly paid via Payment By Results contracts, Social Investment Bonds and other funding vehicles that suit organisations with capital that are ‘investment ready’, that is for-profit organisations, larger charities, or formal consortia that can pool resources and risk.”<sup>1</sup>*

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Current funding and policy mechanisms are problematic for smaller, community-based and risk-averse organisations. They are in the interests of larger organisations and those that aspire to growth: entrepreneurial individuals and groups seeking to replicate and diversify their services. It is not surprising, then, that the youth impact agenda has attracted a wide range of supporters with differing and sometimes contradictory values and beliefs. The top-down policy steerage comes from a Conservative government that encourages the importing of market and venture capitalist principles into all arenas of public life, while shrinking the state and reducing spending on public services. Whereas impact enthusiasts from youth sector organisations may well be agnostic about - or even critical of - market mechanisms, arguing instead on the grounds of social justice and pragmatism that the sector must make more efficient use of limited resources for the benefit of young people.

The problem with this latter position (pro-impact but not necessarily pro-market) is that it is not possible to separate the current impact agenda from its market logic.

In pursuit of markets, traditional and qualitative methods of evaluation are an indulgence, because they cannot be compared or monetised. In this context, only those practices that are amenable to measurement are seen as ‘good investments’.

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Practices that are less suited to the use of impact tools and logic models are likely to become marginalised: less understood, less valued and less fundable.

As a youth worker for many years, and more recently as a researcher, I am concerned about how the new youth impact agenda will affect traditions of youth work that are based on long-term, community-based, critical, youth-centred and informal education approaches. Youth work is difficult to measure, and as a consequence it becomes particularly vulnerable in a policy and practice climate dominated by market-oriented understandings of impact.

## Marginalising youth work

It is important to be specific here about what I mean by youth work, which is sometimes used inaccurately as a catch-all term for almost any form of work with young people. Youth work is a distinctive field of practice that puts young people at the centre of the work, and starts from their concerns, their interests and their own starting points. Young people engage in youth work by choice, usually in their leisure time, and they are free to leave without sanction. This puts them in a qualitatively different power relationship with their youth workers than they tend to have with other adults in their lives.

<sup>1</sup> See: <https://indefenceofyouthwork.com/2015/05/26/creating-a-new-vision-of-public-money-and-youth-work-idyw-seminar-june-22-manchester/>

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Youth work is based on an informal education approach; in other words, youth workers deliberately create spaces and opportunities for young people to learn through activities, conversation, relationship and association.

Similar practices take place in a variety of countries, and the European term 'open youth work'<sup>2</sup> might be more useful than the terms 'open access' and 'universal' that are more commonly used in the UK. While youth clubs and street-based work tend to be open to all, there is also a rich history and ongoing practice of LGBT youth projects, girls groups and Black young people's work, as well as groups for young people with shared experiences, for example, young carers and young people excluded from school. The crucial point is that youth work is chosen by young people, rather than imposed on them. Youth work is open to young people's perspectives and self-understandings, and it is also open about its methods, its aims and the outcomes that might emerge.

It is this characteristic openness that makes youth work difficult to 'measure'. While youth work involves thoughtful preparation and substantial reflection, it is an improvisatory practice with a significant focus on process rather than outcome, an openness to what might happen 'between the cracks'. Uncertainty and doubt are valued because they prevent adults from having too fixed an idea of what a young person might need. The process of youth work has no clear beginning or end: some young people may stay involved over many years; others may be intensely but intermittently engaged; and others may seem to be on the fringes, yet appreciate the youth club's role in their lives.

Youth work is a community-based endeavour that aims to enrich the community it is part of rather than simply focusing on the development of individuals. I have worked in places where the youth club has been a feature of a neighbourhood for decades, where some of the young people's parents used to attend, perhaps even their grandparents. It is abundantly clear that there is 'impact' in these settings yet the nature of this impact varies over time, often emerges many years later, and is unlikely to be replicable.

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One of the clearest accounts of the tensions between youth work and the impact agenda is written by Nick Axford, a keen advocate of youth impact. Noting ten areas of contention, he asks whether youth work and evidence-based practice might be 'worlds apart'. Axford ends by acknowledging:

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*"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, and youth work has a job on its hands to convince them otherwise. Resistance to scrutiny is likely to be perceived as being deliberately difficult and opaque in order to hide woolly thinking and lack of effectiveness."<sup>3</sup>*

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**Evaluation and critical reflection are central to good youth work; in recent years, unfortunately, the dominant forms of monitoring have squeezed the space for meaningful evaluation.**

I am not sure whether youth workers' doubts about the impact agenda equate to resistance to scrutiny – most youth workers I have met are keen to share their work.

<sup>2</sup> See European Confederation of Youth Clubs website (undated) at: <http://www.ecyc.org/about-us/open-youth-work>

<sup>3</sup> Nick Axford at: <https://www.youthimpact.uk/reading-opinion/opinions/youth-work-and-evidence-based-practice-worlds-apart>



However, years of negative experiences of surveillant and target-oriented procedures do contribute to an understandable resistance to top-down monitoring. Evaluation and critical reflection are central to good youth work; in recent years, unfortunately, the dominant forms of monitoring have squeezed the space for meaningful evaluation. To understand these processes, it is useful to look at the theory of performativity.

## Performativity: how measurement shapes practice

Writing about schools and universities, Professor Stephen Ball argues that education has become dominated by performativity: systems of measurement and data collection that regulate practice and intensify judgement and comparison.<sup>4</sup> Organisations are required to monitor and improve their own performances, and those of their employees and students or service users. In workplaces that are dominated by performativity, only that which can be measured really counts. Measuring here is not a neutral act; it facilitates judgement and regulates resources, celebrating some practices and marginalising others.

I became interested in performativity during my recent qualitative research with grassroots youth workers.<sup>5</sup> When I asked these passionate and committed part-timers and volunteers whether there was anything they didn't like about their work, nearly all of them talked about targets and outcomes. Some found monitoring an irrelevant and tedious distraction that took time away from young people, while others had a more fundamental critique, arguing that dominant systems of measurement tended to position and label young people in problematic ways, and threatened the nature of their relationships with young people.

One of the problems with performativity is that systems of measurement and evaluation – once used as a mode of regulation and judgement – come to seem more 'real' than the work itself. If the data is what 'counts' for funding, then if we want our projects and services to remain open then we are likely to direct our energies towards practices that will produce the 'correct' data.

4 Stephen Ball (2003) 'The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity', *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2): 215-228.

5 The research involved in-depth interviews and focus groups with 35 part-time and volunteer youth workers in England, alongside extensive participant observation in two youth organisations. See: Tania de St Croix (2016) *Grassroots youth work: Policy, passion and resistance in practice*, Bristol: Policy Press.

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Some forms of work appear relatively easy to measure, and thus become highly valued: for example, we might think of a twelve-week programme that aims to improve confidence.<sup>6</sup> Other forms of work are more difficult to measure and, as a result, may be seen as having little value. Open youth work is 'volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees'<sup>7</sup>. The work is indeterminate in timespan, young people are likely to dip in and out over many years, and any 'outcomes' emerge over time, often many years later. Under the youth impact agenda organisations may feel obliged to move away from open youth work in favour of fixed-term programmes which are easier to measure and thus easier to fund.

## Changing who we are

Performativity does not only change what we do as youth workers, it also transforms who we are, our identities and emotions. In the attempt to 'prove' outcomes, there is a clear incentive for workers to work with particular young people who will make the statistics work.

Graeme Tiffany writes evocatively about the 'pistachio effect', in which target cultures caused detached youth workers to work with young people who were amenable to joining and completing structured youth development programmes, neglecting the more marginalised and disengaged young people who were once the traditional focus of youth work on the streets because it would take too long to

6 Impact measurement is problematic for time-limited settings and programmes too – for example, the measurement of confidence means little in isolation, as confidence is context-dependant and likely to shift over time – see Taylor & Taylor: <http://www.indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Threatening-YW-and-Illusion-final1.pdf>

7 In Defence of Youth Work: <https://indefenceofyouthwork.com/>

## Questioning the youth impact agenda

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engage them, and the outcomes would be too uncertain.<sup>8</sup>

Performativity changes subtly what it feels like to be a youth worker, and what it means to be a young person within youth work. Measurement systems rarely reflect 'real' youth work, and this creates a clash between what grassroots workers believe in and what they must do to prove their worth. In my research, there was a palpable sense of dislocation and inner conflict amongst practitioners. They wanted to do a great job for young people, and they wanted their work to be recognised. And yet sometimes the evaluation and monitoring mechanisms seemed to conflict with what they felt was right. One worker talked of 'feeling sick' as he lined young people up, asking them to fill in forms recording the 'outcomes' they had achieved through cooking or other activities. Another said that a deep and trusting conversation with a young person would be destroyed if he later took out a piece of paper that recorded the value of the interaction; he imagined the young person would think:

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*'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?'*

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8 See Graeme Tiffany (2010) 'Social Inclusion in Europe and youth work: Issues of power, authority and control' at <http://www.graemetiffany.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/Social-Inclusion-in-Europe-and-youth-work.pdf>

9 de St Croix (2016) p. 95

## Alternative approaches to impact?

Organisations must be accountable: unsafe or unethical practices need to be challenged, and resources should be used for the benefit of young people. Yet theories of performativity caution us that the accountability mechanisms we choose will shape practice, legitimising some approaches and marginalising others.

Finding a better approach to accountability, then, is not simply about finding a more appropriate and congruent set of 'tools'. It is also about politics and power, trust and relationship.

When I was first a youth worker, a great emphasis was placed on evaluation – we evaluated at the end of each session, and in more depth every half term. We recorded numbers of how many young people had participated, and noted topics of conversation, individual change and group processes. We held regular evaluation discussions with young people and sometimes asked them to fill out evaluation forms.

Of course, these mechanisms were not free from the logic of performativity. The power and restrictive qualities of performativity depend partly on how high the stakes are; if young people's evaluations or the numbers participating had been linked to the 'payment by results' contracts of today, then these tools may well have had a distorting effect on practice (perhaps encouraging popular activities such as theme park trips that would attract good ratings and high numbers). As it was, for all the imperfections of these systems of evaluation our own evaluations gave us time to reflect, think and learn collectively as practitioners, and young people's spoken or written evaluations informed our practice and showed young people that their views were important.

For all their faults, the best local authority youth services of the past had neighbourhood youth officers who knew their local communities and the youth work that took place there. They got involved, helped out on a residential, were there with a chat and a cup of tea when things got difficult. They knew the projects that were going well and the ones that were struggling and needed support because they had a relationship with those of us working on the ground. The



same was true of voluntary sector organisations, where managers tended to contribute to day-to-day practice rather than simply overseeing it, and of funders, who visited and supported the projects they funded. While this might sound a rose-tinted memory, I experienced it and I know many others did too. The weight of managerial administration that has entered youth work in recent decades militates against managers being involved in grassroots youth work; there are many layers of management, relationships have become more distant, and trust is more difficult to achieve.

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**We need to rethink – as practitioners, young people, policy makers and members of the public – what we mean by accountability and what we want from it.**

public – what we mean by accountability and what we want from it. Youth work focuses first and foremost on young people within their communities, and aims to start from where they are starting from. Accountability in this context needs to be both democratic and youth-centred and this does not simply mean asking a group of the most motivated and confident young people to help with designing and implementing evaluation mechanisms. It involves building trust and relationships at all levels of an organisation and its practice, and thinking about the direct and indirect effects of the types of evaluation we use.

There are ways to be accountable and communicate the value of youth work that are relatively congruent with this distinctive practice. One example is In Defence of Youth Work's story-telling workshops, in which youth workers and/or young people come together to tell stories that illustrate the special impact of youth work on young people's lives.<sup>10</sup>

A key feature of these workshops is the collective element in which the story-teller is questioned by peers who help them to delve more deeply into the 'taken for granted' processes involved in youth work. Story-telling workshops are by no means perfect and neither do they float free of the problematic market context discussed here; what they do contribute is the rigour of collective peer accountability, an appreciation for youth work as a complex and non-linear process, and an inherent and critical focus on the quality of practice.

## Conclusion

In an attempt to survive, it is understandable that practitioners and organisations feel the need to develop the quantitative and comparable impact mechanisms required in the current policy and funding context. To enable a genuinely youth-centred, practice-oriented, bottom-up approach to accountability though, we need to keep questioning what counts as evaluation and argue for approaches (including qualitative and collective evaluation) that are congruent with the kind of work we are doing. We also need to be critical about the context in which the new youth impact agenda is thriving: the fundamentally unjust system that places providers in competition with each other for short-term precariously funded contracts.

Youth impact tools and social investment models are being used to further encourage market forces in the youth sector, enabling profiteering from the lives of young people. In this context, open, long-term and community-based projects such as youth work are in danger, particularly where they are run by small local organisations. The complex challenge is for practitioners and young people to come together collectively to argue – critically and reflectively – for the value of youth work, while questioning and opposing its commodification, monetisation and privatisation.

<sup>10</sup> See the resource website <https://story-tellinginyouthwork.com/> and the 2011 book, *This is youth work: Stories from practice*, [https://indefenceofyouthwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/20252-youth-stories-report-2011\\_4th-1.pdf](https://indefenceofyouthwork.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/20252-youth-stories-report-2011_4th-1.pdf)

# About the Centre for Youth Impact

**The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations committed to working together to progress thinking and practice around evidence and impact measurement in work with young people.**

We offer:

- A 'route in' to information, support and discussion in relation to evidence and impact
- Local and national events where you can collaborate with others, learn and build momentum
- Resources to support meaningful impact measurement
- An inclusive platform to promote debate and ideas

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