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Squeezed Out: The Value of Stories in Youth Work's Growing Measurement Landscape

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Since the inception of the Good Friday Agreement (1998) there have been many twists and turns for 'the New Northern Ireland' in social, political and economic terms. Within this context youth work has experienced unprecedented change. These changes have unsettled and somewhat de-stabilised youth work *structures* across Northern Ireland and as a result youth work *practice* has experienced a period of flux. This article explores the ways in which political, funding and statutory systems are increasingly dictating how youth work is measured and as a consequence, how it is delivered. Fundamentally, this article argues that within a growing measurement landscape those features that make youth work so unique are in danger of being squeezed out of this narrative. Additionally, in the drive to prove outcome and impact through various measurement tools, the stories of change, development and growth get overlooked in favour of more 'scientific', quantifiable approaches.

Youth Work in a Changing World

Within Northern Ireland (NI) the political and funding landscapes have been steadily changing. In 2004, UK Government carried out a Review of Public Administration in NI, whereby public services were rationalised and re-structured across the region as part of government plans to cut public spending. The place of the youth service within the Department of Education was cemented through this process. Those who championed youth work as an informal learning process were relieved to have the relationship with DE

recognised. The after-effects of this alignment however have shown the ways in which the formal (some might argue quantifiable) has undermined the informal, unregulated space of youth work.

This structural decision has had far-reaching consequences. The process began in 2008 with a comprehensive consultation process and subsequent report (Haydon and McAlister, 2009). This came amidst cuts to the youth work budget and a growing suspicion that the review exercise was undertaken as a way to undermine youth work by stealth. The process was slow and meandering and in 2012, a draft policy document, 'Priorities for Youth', was produced sparking a second consultation process (relegating the first one to a 'pre-consultation process' retrospectively).

The unspoken objective for policy reform was revealed in the final policy document, in the words of the then Minister for Education, John O'Dowd:

'The major and recurrent issue for my Department was that youth work could no longer be allowed to remain a separate policy, detached from the overall education priorities' (DE, 2013).

The inference was that youth work needed to 'compliment' the formal education agenda; rather than having any distinct merit in and of itself.

The initial implementation of Priorities for Youth policy (2014-2016) has meant momentous change for the 'architecture' of the youth service. Alongside funding pressures this has brought about the demise of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland and Youthnet; in tandem with the amalgamation of five Education and Library Boards into one organisation, the Education Authority. Operational changes in the delivery of youth services are developing more slowly, with time needed to develop a Regional Youth Development Plan and new funding mechanisms for voluntary youth sector organisations.

These changes at a local level are mirrored and further compounded on a larger scale. The dominance of neo-liberalism as a global ideology is far-reaching, impacting not only on youth work but also on how societies and

communities of people are viewed. The pervasive nature of neo-liberal thinking in the youth work arena means that project outcomes and outputs are measured using tools more suited to measuring marketplace 'success'. This means that for every input there has to be an output and one that is worth the resources that have been invested. It leads to an emphasis on outcomes-based measurement, value for money, targets and competition for scarce resources.

In business a focus on profit, outcome and competitors may make financial sense. When similar thinking is used, however, to measure the value or impact of youth work approaches, programmes and interventions it reduces young people to commodities and professional youth work relationships to nothing short of factory line predictability. Illustrative of this, Davies (2013) notes the ways in which political and policy drivers, across England, are effectively changing youth work from a profession to a 'service'. The increased focus on proving outcomes and impact through 'scientific', quantifiable models and measurement tools is gaining traction to the exclusion of most other means. We maintain that such a focus is not fitting for demonstrating the impact that youth work can have on young people and disregards the vision, principles and ethics of youth work. In order to fully capture the transformative impact of youth work, other 'fit for purpose' tools are required. The remainder of this paper focuses on those core youth work values so often overlooked in traditional measurement and ways of capturing the impact of these.

Working with purpose and intention: centralising youth work values

Youth work is defined in a myriad of ways. Consistently 'personal and social development', 'experiential learning' and 'supporting young people to reach their potential' are commonly understood to be core principles underpinning the work. The constant and increasing bureaucratic demands on youth workers; organising programmes, managing resources, preparing funding applications, monitoring and evaluation activities, managing other staff or

volunteers and not least responding to young people's immediate needs, is in danger of distracting workers from reflecting on and communicating effectively these core principles of the work. Furthermore the lack of scope within existing evaluation and measurement tools to accurately reflect upon these principles means that workers are forced to use ill-fitting tools to capture and measure what is it they are doing; what they are achieving. While workers have designed innovative and creative ways to capture the impact of the work, the adoption of these more qualitative tools outside of the sector is relatively limited. All too often it is those with limited understanding of the most basic youth work principles who decide upon and design measurement tools. Left to funding requirements and rigid evaluator procedures those very aspects, which make youth work unique, are in danger of being squeezed out.

Measuring the work, especially when using public monies, must be efficient, effective and transparent but furthermore it must have regard for the very human aspect of our engagement with young people. To overlook or fail to capture the impact of the connections between youth workers and young people misses the central premise of the work: that youth work is relational. When we lose sight of the young person's story, hearing and seeing all the mess, the chaos, the stress, hurt, pain, loss, rejection as well as the hopes, the visions, the dreams and the joys, we begin to lose sight of what the profession is about. Youth work needs story-telling and conversation to be part of its measurement. As Muirhead notes, 'communicating youth work's benefits through a narrative sits better...than generating stats and figures' (2015). This more person-centred approach creates opportunities to explore with young people how they interpret their lives and how they construct meaning for the various worlds they inhabit (Ord 2014, VeLure Roholt & Baizerman 2013) then to build the work from that on the basis of young people's perspectives and expertise.

Pushing back as a collective: finding new ways to demonstrate impact

This paper has illustrated the ways in which political, funding and statutory systems are eroding those values, approaches and methodologies central to youth work. The combination of a lack of funding and increased targeted

services has led to a narrowing of the scope of youth work (Wylie, 2015). The starting point, parameters and 'success' of programmes (and thus of the work with the young people involved in them) is no longer defined by young people themselves or those who work with them. Funders, government, evaluators, tracking and auditing tools are prioritised, seen as more scientific, producing 'reliable', 'objective', 'quantifiable' evidence of impact. Within the context of outcomes-based frameworks and formulas, there is little place for the inclusion of those factors which make youth work distinct. The power of the transformative relationship, the young person's journey, the learning from the process, and the human aspect of the work are increasingly erased, deemed 'soft', 'subjective', 'anecdotal', 'un-measurable'.

A climate of competition, fear and individualism has emerged in the context of scarce resources and the privileging of some forms of evidence and impact over others (Davis, 2013). Competition for the survival of an organisation, an area of work, a programme young people depend on, can lead to an acceptance of these new approaches and the potential dilution of youth work principles and values. Alternatively, organisations can reject the constraints of funders and their auditors. Yet in rejecting those processes that devalue youth work principles, they risk the very future of their organisation and their work with young people.

These are challenging times for youth work in Northern Ireland. We have seen the grinding down of workers and the shrinking of what was felt to be a vibrant and organic sector. While one could become despondent, we have at the same time witnessed the power of collective resistance to challenge authority and ultimately change policy. This should give us hope and confidence in the power of collective action. Troubling recent developments have been to the cost of jobs and even entire organisations. Standing up and speaking out therefore cannot be individual, too great is the cost for any one organisation to bear. Rather there is a need for a collective rejection of the gradual decimation of youth work, pulling together at a time when we are being driven apart by a need for money to survive.

Of course youth work should be held accountable but we need to ensure that we resist becoming 'willing collaborators' (Davis, 2013: 13) with those new systems, targets and measurements that fail to adequately capture the uniqueness of youth work approaches. Rather we should seek to push back on such advances as a collective, and in its place find alternative ways, congruent with our ethos and core principles to capture the value of relational youth work (Gallagher and Morgan, 2013: 51), to bring to the forefront in our reporting those things about our practice that are so unique and all too frequently overlooked.

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