Rethinking Impact…

Debs Erwin & Gail Neill

While we have undoubtedly missed out on a lot this last 18 months, the online world that has developed because of Covid restrictions has opened some new opportunities that previously might not have been possible (due to cost, time, or location). Personally, I (Gail) have been able to dip into and experience conferences, talks, and events on a global scale. Hearing new and innovative research, engaging with those whose material I'd only ever read and discussing areas of interest with a board range of practitioners and academics has been incredibly motivating during what would otherwise have been a very isolating and demotivating time.

Last week I bumped into local freelance youth consultant, Debs Erwin, as we attended the online Rethinking Impact conference hosted by Tania de St Croix and Louise Doherty. The research they presented, and the subsequent workshops and discussion sparked so many ideas that Debs and I caught up afterwards to continue to unpack what we'd heard. While we highly recommend that you engage directly with the material, we also want to share some of our own reflections on the day and some of the challenges and opportunities this raises for local youth work.

Impact, evaluation and accountability – the meaning of words.

I have a confession that I think might resonate with some of you – for about the first 10 years of my youth work career (I accept this wasn't yesterday) the words 'impact' and 'accountability' were completely alien concepts and 'evaluation' tended to be a one pager that a young person completed after going on a residential, as much to prove to a funder that that they were there as anything else. Don't get me wrong, while we didn't collect 'data' as such we were always in the process of reflectively considering the significance and meaning of our interactions with young people - what was going on for them, how we might best support them, what we could do to offset or speak back to some of the injustices or inequalities they were experiencing.

Somewhere along the way things changed.

Graeme Tiffany, speaking at the conference, asked us to consider the ways in which language changes our practice. In other words, how the increasingly common language of measurement, impact, and accountability might have changed what it is we do with young people or at least how we understand it. Once this language is part of the framing of youth work and how we conceptualise it, then how we articulate it to others will further reinforce our practices in this direction. While we rightly need to account for public monies awarded to organisations, programmes and initiatives, the nature of certain forms of monitoring and measuring can prove troublesome as Tania and Louise's research documents. This new language of accountability and value for money is in danger of erasing some of what makes our practice so unique because such things are not easily captured, and some outcomes are not necessarily possible in tight timeframes or considered ambitious enough by external funding bodies.

For example, in a climate of guaranteed results or return on investment the ‘slow burn’ of our relationships with young people in terms of how the wider impacts of youth work might only be articulated years later can be hard to argue. Similarly, when prioritising outputs and outcomes the intrinsic value of a youth worker and the protective factors this offers can appear vague. The vital role that workers play in ‘holding’ young people, being that consistent source of support, who stand beside a young person in order that they might weather a personal storm is difficult to quantify when on the face of it there is no tangible movement or achievement.

If we are not careful, we are in danger of losing the essence of youth work. Not because we cannot see its value but because the ways in which impact is measured does not adequately account for it. And by the way, there is nothing new in what we are saying, these debates have ebbed and flowed for years under different guises. A valuable distinction that was shared at the conference was that 'impact’ is ultimately about how we attach meaning and value – ‘meaning’ in terms of our understanding of core youth work concepts and how we frame our work with young people, and ‘value’ in terms of the importance we attribute to this work.

Capturing value and meaning – the role of reflection

Inspired by the conference we would like to call for a revival of reflective practice. One of the key takeaways of the day was the observation that reflective practice is generally understood and accepted to be core to youth work practice, which means that intrinsically youth work is evaluative. This suggests that evaluation shouldn’t be seen as an ‘add-on’ nor as a bind for youth workers. But has it become such – because it’s yet another task, it’s there to keep funders happy, or it’s been formulated within stringent and bureaucratic parameters?

What if reflective practice and evaluation were about embarking on voyages of discovery? This might be too much of a leap into fantasy if your idea of a voyage of discovery is about seeing how far you can get in a pedalo boat when you’re on holiday in the Med. But what if our orientation to a session debrief with colleagues or the drive home in the car is about exploring our observations, sharing the moments we felt were significant, looking for the ‘hole in the bagel’ – what’s not there and what that tells us, searching for meaning and value and playing around with all of these ideas to find treasure. In this sense reflective practice can be a way of excavating precious learning to find new understandings and ideas and different ways of doing things. Such discussion might help us identify what young people are teaching us about their lives, consider how they are changing and growing, or notice where they are stuck and better understand the barriers getting in their way. It might also help us see how we can best provide safe and supportive spaces where young people feel welcome, have the time they need to express themselves and exercise their voice and where they are honoured for who they are.

One of the things I (Debs) valued most about the conference was the blend of conceptual dialogue and the focus on practice and by that, I mean that the discussions were rich in relation to our understanding of who we are as youth workers expressed through a deep commitment to doing good work with young people. My hunch is that a revitalisation of our reflective practice might bring us to a new place of fluency, that is articulate about who we are as youth workers, what we’re doing when we ‘youth work’ and what makes for the

‘good’ in good youth work, as was raised at the conference. And that can set the tone for youth work that is robust in its delivery and its evidence, and it will carry currency for key stakeholders whether funders or policy makers or parents and most importantly for young people themselves. It means that youth work is not on the back foot, having to respond to dictates from elsewhere, constantly having to justify itself and prove repeatedly that it is worthy, offers ‘value for money’, or is effective and so on. It means that youth work can be rooted in its own standing as a profession that supports young people to figure out what makes for a good life.

The challenge therefore, is to critically consider how language is shaping our practice and also to collectively find ways for our practice to speak back to this. How might we trouble taken-for-granted ideas of recording and reporting those things that have slipped in gradually over time and become a feature of how our work is understood and deemed of worth?

The value of reflective practitioners coming together, such as at the *Rethinking Impact* conference, is that it provides a reflective, exploratory space for critically considering and deconstructing terminologies that are often prescribed and enables our practice to inform the ways in which we describe our work with young people. Consequently, we need to articulate the value of our work based on young people’s experiences as well as our own observations, be explicit about what makes our practice different and find new ways to attribute meaning and value so that we’re capturing impact in a way that is richer, young person-centred and carries greater integrity.

This is not about a militant youth work that avoids accountability or transparency, quite the opposite, it's a youth work that is proactive and intentional and curious and open. As we experienced at the conference, it’s ok to generate more questions than answers, because often those questions can open new avenues and opportunities to foster connection with others, to grapple with the tensions, and to identify important lessons for our practice. Perhaps we can rethink impact in such a way that drills down into what’s working, what we are doing and who we are being that can create positive possibilities for young people. Perhaps then we can become more at ease with the things that are seemingly intangible because we are able to articulate what is meaningful and valuable in the eyes of young people.