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Monitoring and evaluating youth work

John Rose

As the amount of youth work sponsored by local and central government has grown so we have seen an increase in the extent to which the practice of workers and performance of agencies has been monitored and evaluated by funders. John Rose looks at the implications this has for practice and the benefits and problems arising from a heightened increase in the monitoring and evaluation of youth work.

Most funders monitor and evaluate youth work using an 'accountability model'. This model is being pushed forward by a continuing political agenda that prioritises 'economy, effectiveness and quality'. It is an ideology underpinned by systems which allocate financial resources based on an ability to demonstrate through the attainment of measurable outcomes that the specified requirements are met. Consequently, additional bidding, monitoring and evaluation processes have been introduced to ensure that funders, often the government, are more able to control 'delivery'.

This approach has also become the accepted way of judging young people's learning. Driven by the examination culture schools have refined their structures, management styles, teaching methods, monitoring and evaluation systems in an attempt to ensure young people secure ever-improving examination results (Griffith 2000). School-based monitoring systems are in use to manage the effective knowledge acquisition of young people. These are concerned to keep a continuous record of the incremental learning of pupils through their involvement in standardised individual testing. The overall evaluation of the process as a means

of judging school effectiveness is measured against the attainment of the stipulated outcomes. The inability of individual schools to attain the outcomes leads to the school being publicly labelled as 'failing' or 'failed'. This approach has also had a profound effect upon youth work. Current policy and practice have become underpinned by the belief that the primary outcome measure of educational achievement is examination results.

Youth work and the new managerialism

The challenges faced by youth workers within this new environment appear to be of little concern or interest to governments. The political position is unambiguous. To secure government support workers have to identify the outcomes of their interventions in relation to their contribution to the delivery of the government's economic and social agenda. As a consequence many, perhaps most, youth workers are asked to quantify how they contribute to, for example:

- Increasing the numbers of young people staying in, or returning to education.
- Preparing young people for the world of work.
- Reducing crime and anti-social behaviour.
- Improving health.
- Raising levels of political involvement.

If agencies fail to do this on time and to a specified standard they will be punished. Youth services and agencies are becoming more like other 'human service' organisations driven by the threat of withdrawal of funding, faced with enhanced competition, increased bureaucracy and external inspections.

To survive, many youth workers and agencies have developed new evaluation and monitoring systems. Some have sought to make them more relevant to what they see as the guiding principles of youth work. Many hold that from such principles a set of values can be agreed which help determine ways of working with young people that respect basic human rights, their uniqueness as individuals, the right to self-determination and the educational and social importance of choice, freedom, responsibility and justice (Banks 1999). Youth workers like others operating in social welfare organisations need to develop 'through the prism of their own specialism' (Drakeford 1998) discrete modes of evaluation and monitoring.

What do youth services and agencies need to do?

Youth workers should not automatically reject or avoid the idea of monitoring and evaluation as a process. Rather, there should be recognition of their potential contribution to the development of practice and as a means of consolidating youth work. Those involved in the monitoring and evaluation debate should be exploring new developments in the search for more appropriate methods of valuing the learning involved as a result of young people's engagement with youth work. At the same time youth services and agencies should also be giving consideration to a small number of issues each of which have, if left unresolved, the potential to distort how the work is monitored and evaluated.

First, we need to address the confusion within youth work regarding the relationship between purpose, principles, values and ethics. This is not to suggest there is a general lack of knowledge about these issues, which are well documented in a range of publications (NYA 2000; WYA 2002). It is more about recognising the difficulties associated with the embedded collective understanding of the 'essence' of youth work and the difficulties related to agreed definitions of as to what youth work 'does', how it 'does it' and what 'results' are planned and achieved. Practitioners found that achieving this is more difficult because of the conflicts they encounter between a professional code, which advocates attention to the expressed needs of individuals and groups, and bureaucratic pressure for increased efficiency and compliance to predetermined outcomes. This conflict is constantly exacerbated by the need for workers to maintain their levels of professional knowledge in a rapidly changing practice environment, which often challenges their philosophical and knowledge base. This can result in a situation where patterns of task and knowledge are inherently unstable (Schön 1983).

Second, there is a historic difficulty in defining and measuring the outcomes of youth work practice. The work of youth services is increasingly driven by a belief that effective programmes will develop in young people a wide range of what are described as 'soft skills' or 'enhanced emotional intelligence'. These include fostering attributes and skills such as an ability to communicate, work in teams, solve problems, and develop self-esteem or display 'initiative'. The monitoring and evaluation of the extent to which youth work interventions sponsor the acquisition of these characteristics is difficult if not impossible. For example, workers lack access both to the point young people have reached prior to intervention and the extent to which other, parallel, learning experiences contribute to change. As a consequence, there is no credible 'scale' able to measure the 'distance travelled by young people'. Even if it were possible to develop

the tools to measure progress, a problem would remain. The philosophical position of much youth work has located the ownership and assessment of learning with young people. This requires an approach that recognises the intrinsic value of learning managed through the development of the skills of action and reflection (Freire 1972). However, such approaches have little credibility within an environment that perceives monitoring and evaluation as management tools whose primary function is to ensure that set objectives are achieved within the cost calculations imposed by policy makers.

Third, what appears to have happened, and what seems to be continuing to happen, is the plagiarising of models more appropriate to other areas of work including formal school- and college-based education. The consequence of this is all too obvious. There is a growing trend to involve young people in a range of activities that lend themselves to monitoring and evaluation processes linked to outcomes measured by external sources. Open College Network (OCNs), National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), Youth Achievement Awards, Award Scheme Development and Accreditation Network (ASDANs) and their like are proliferating within a new youth work environment driven by political dogma. We need to step back from this before it is too late and recognition of the special contribution of youth work is lost within the new landscape of managerialism and accountability.

What do youth workers need to do?

Within this context youth workers need to undertake a number of tasks. In particular they must:

- Identify the various strands of monitoring and evaluation that are to be found in a complex organisation such as youth and children's services;
- Identify appropriate methods of monitoring and evaluation that reflect the wide range of accountabilities relevant to the responsibilities of the youth services and agencies;
- Recognise that monitoring and evaluation of the outcomes of their work with young people should reflect the purpose, principles and values of their work, which places ownership of the process in the hands of young people;
- Recognise that this concept is almost always alien to government, funding bodies and other professional organisations and most importantly – because of their previous experiences – to young people themselves.

Those working within youth and children's services should know the concept of monitoring as a system employing a variety of tools that warn, check, control or keep a continuous record of things that need to be known. The same can also be said about the idea of *evaluation*, which is a process to judge or assess the worth of a particular act or product. The rules of monitoring and evaluation are also easy to locate, as are the theoretical styles for conducting them. It is also relatively easy to identify the reasons why monitoring and evaluation are useful organisational tools.

An examination of the characteristics of monitoring and evaluation describes a process dependent on:

- A clear understanding of the purpose/principles/values/ethics of the setting being monitored and evaluated;
- Deciding the purpose of the monitoring and evaluation process;
- Agreeing the style of monitoring and evaluation to be adopted;
- Describing the intended outcomes of the project;
- Designing monitoring and evaluation systems that reflect the context within which they are to be used;
- Describing the process to be used (this should be accordant with the purpose and the style of approach to be adopted, which would be constructed to be compatible with agreed principles, values and ethics);
- Identifying the roles and responsibilities of those involved in the setting being monitored and evaluated;
- Agreeing benchmarks in the development of the project;
- Agreeing the types of evidence to be used to measure that objectives have been met;
- Determining reasons for success or failure as measured against achieving intended outcomes;
- Reflection and review.

Within this framework youth workers need to recognise at least three different strands of monitoring and evaluation within youth work and understand their relative importance to its young people-first approach. These strands are related to measuring:

- organisation criteria;
- the role and functions of the youth worker;
- the learning of young people who come into contact with youth work agencies and services.

The first strand is about monitoring and evaluating the range of management responsibilities relevant to the roles and responsibilities of the youth worker, including finance, personnel, risk assessment, health and safety and child protection. Guidance on how these and other elements are monitored and evaluated is normally contained within the standing orders of most local authorities and voluntary organisations. These often require the youth worker to follow agreed procedures, which meet audit arrangements, relevant legislation and agreed quality standards. The collection of this type of data generally relies on quantitative methods of collection involving the service manager, youth worker, young people and others from outside of the organisation. This type of information is often supplemented by the collection of other quantifiable data sometimes requested by employing organisations but often developed as an aid to individual workers to improve practice. It often includes:

- The overall attendance levels and attendance patterns of individuals;
- The length of time particular young people have been in contact with the agency or service;
- The age and gender of those attending;
- A record of the types of activities undertaken;
- A record of qualifications and attainments as a result of involvement in the agency's or service's activities.

The second strand is related to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the youth worker measured against how work with young people is carried out in a way that reflects the agreed purpose, principles, values and ethics of the work. The targets for measuring these are often contained within a range of organisational documents including, for example, Strategic and Operational Plans; policy documents; job descriptions; time sheets; and recording sheets. Governments also set benchmarks which impact directly on the roles and functions of the youth worker and these too need systems of monitoring and evaluating to check that the effectiveness of services can be measured. These government benchmarks in more recent times have often been focused on reducing what are described by Huskins (2001) as the dangerous behaviour of young people. Included in this description are truancy and school exclusion, drug misuse, risky sexual behaviour, and crime and anti-social behaviour. This agenda normally uses utilitarian methods of monitoring and evaluation including quantifiable evidence to suggest, for example, that school truancy and school exclusion, criminal activities and anti-social behaviour by the young had been reduced as a result of youth work interventions. From this perspective the things that should be known to those within youth

work – obtained from appropriate monitoring and evaluation systems – are influenced by a set of general principles, which describe young people as deficient and in need of rehabilitation.

If youth workers follow the government agenda, however, there will be a need to recognise what Young (2006: 2) describes as the moral philosophy of youth work: a position concerned to 'enable and support young people to ask and answer the central question of self – what sort of person am I? What kind of relationship do I want to have with myself and others? What kind of society do I want to live in?' From this starting point the things that need to be known by those within the work change fundamentally, as does the ownership of what needs to be known. The first model suggests that what needs to be known, needs to be known by those in positions of power, which generally means the adult youth worker on behalf of a greater authority. The second model takes a completely different view in that the position is driven by a young person-first approach, which recognises that ownership of what needs to be known is firmly in the control of the **individual** young person.

As a result of the greater involvement of government this young person-first approach presents a significant challenge regarding how the youth worker monitors and evaluates their work within the current political environment. This challenge is caused primarily by the entrenched view of government – sometimes aided by those within youth services – that young people are a homogeneous group capable of being altered as a consequence of establishment reform. Changes to the school system, increases to the range of further and higher education opportunities, new criminal justice arrangements, work experience and training schemes are all too often seen as ways of ensuring the government's agenda is being met – often at the expense of individuals. This needs to be challenged by those within youth work, underpinned as it is by the particular moral philosophy described previously. There is a need to move more closely to a position where young people during their involvement with youth workers are recognised as individuals requiring access to a range of strategies able to equip them to make sense of their own life. For services and agencies this is a process concerned to give young people ownership of the decisions that affect them. The outcome of such an approach is the development in young people of skills that enable them to reflect on their actions, which in turn leads to more positive personal decisions and more appropriate actions. The challenge is great but so are the possible outcomes for young people, the communities within which they live and to the economic and social agenda of government. These outcomes will not only be measured by statistics related to increases in formal educational attainment or reductions in crime and anti-social behaviour. They

will also be measured by the general contribution young people make to society through an enhanced understanding of the link between their individual **rights** and associated **responsibilities** as citizens.

For services and agencies driven by a philosophically moral perspective the key to developing awareness and understanding of the personal rights and responsibilities by young people is the idea of 'appropriate education' with its potential to:

- Enable young people to act well and to seek excellence within the social practices in which they engage – (communication, team working and problem solving);
- Enable young people to make reasonable choices;
- Enable young people to develop a consistent character;
- Enable young people to determine for themselves the characteristics of a life worth living.

The nature of and the availability of this *appropriate education* within the community context has been largely disregarded by governments who continue to generally ignore the importance of a style of learning which does not use a mechanistic system of measurement. As a consequence, current thinking by decision-makers has been too concerned to place the education and learning of young people as the almost exclusive remit of formal school-based education. Delivering this responsibility has, however, become a near impossible task for schools, affected as they are by a changing, complex society. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, recognised this during his 2002 Dimpleby Lecture by arguing that the attainment of appropriate education (skills, knowledge and attitude) by young people is being diminished because the institutions that have historically helped many of them shape their lives are not always available. Consequently, too many young people are excluded from family continuity, access to conventional religious practice or involvement in shared public activity. For many young people, particularly those faced with issues of multiple deprivation, work and relationships have become increasingly transient. Within this unstable environment formal school-based education is, in the opinion of the Archbishop, fighting a losing battle to 'sustain a tradition on behalf of the whole community, an accepted set of perspectives on human priorities and relationships, a feel for the conventions of life'.

The development of personal qualities obtained as a result of appropriate education, therefore, needs to take a more radical approach through a more equitable partnership between school- and community-based education and learning, and between formal and non-formal approaches.

From this philosophical standpoint, education and learning opportunities can be and are created in the community, which involves many young people who have – and who have not – been successful within the school system. Learning opportunities through, for example, sport, art, music, drama, outdoor activities, international travel, conservation and involvement in community activities are available to many young people through their contact with a wide range of community-based youth work organisations.

The third strand is concerned with the monitoring and evaluation of the achievements of young people as a result of their involvement with youth services and agencies. This is most important. It should be recognised that the previous two strands of monitoring and evaluation have as their single purpose the delivery of a service capable of contributing to the personal and social development of young people. This third area of monitoring and evaluation is a complex process but critical as a means of ensuring the measurement of the outcomes of that involvement are considered in a way that reflects organisational purpose, principles, values and ethics. This will require the further refinement and use of a range of monitoring and evaluation tools more appropriate to the nature of youth work. Two of these I believe are core and can be supplemented by a number of other tools in a way that enhances the validity and reliability of the information being obtained.

The first tool is self-assessment which recognises that the monitoring and evaluation of a young person's experiences through their involvement with youth work is firmly under their individual control. As stated previously, a frequently asked question of services is about how they measure the distance travelled by young people through involvement in their activities. Youth workers must be able to develop appropriate processes that enable us to reply with confidence that this is a question more appropriately answered by young people themselves. The support for young people to develop the skills to achieve this is one of the greatest challenges. Persuading those in power that it is a credible process with important self-determined outcomes will be another.

A second tool is youth worker observation, reflection and recording. The use of the youth worker as a monitoring and evaluation tool fits comfortably within the philosophically moral position described previously, provided it is carried out in a way that reflects the principles, values and ethics of the organisation. This process of observation, reflection and recording is critically linked to the quality of the relationship between the youth worker and young person. Both the processes of observation and reflection and subsequent recording should be concerned with providing opportunities to individuals and groups through appropriate education.

It is from this position that a contribution to identifying the things that need to be known by those within the work can be obtained.

Supporting the information obtained through self-assessment by young people and the observation, reflection and recordings of the youth worker are a range of other tools including, for example, the use of appropriate formal accreditation systems and the use of statistical evidence. The importance of this approach is the use made of multiple methods of monitoring and evaluation which are used in combination to provide evidence about the things that need to be known by young people as a result of their involvement with youth work agencies and services.

How can we go forward?

The strength of the youth work agency is its educational role which is the priority for the various UK governments in their attempts to successfully achieve an economic and social regeneration agenda. It can be argued, however, that this role is simultaneously its weakness because of the way government policy is driving a formal examination process.

To ensure young people benefit from a broader education and learning opportunities both within school and the community, youth services and agencies need to prove themselves, through the use of appropriate mechanisms, as effective organisations. However, in doing so they must guard against being drawn into adopting only the control mechanisms employed by formal school-based education and learning.

To provide the most appropriate education and learning opportunities for young people agencies and services need to make available evidence to prove the 'examination culture' is inappropriate at a number of different levels – particularly the way it attempts to establish links between academic attainment and economic success. This has been challenged for a number of reasons. First because it is seen to fail to develop in young people the ability to effectively transfer formal educational experiences into other areas of their lives, including work and leisure. Second because this culture fails to encourage wider problem-solving and continuing learning. Arguments are also available to suggest that the measurement of formal levels of education is inappropriate, as a standard of attainment, because of its failure to measure real levels of education. This real level, it is claimed, should include education and learning obtained from outside of the institutionalised and accredited arena and can be located, as a non-formal learning process, within the wider community of family, friends, work and leisure.

What then is the role of youth services and agencies with their commitment to informal and non-formal community-based education and

learning? Are they able to make a contribution to the education and learning of young people complementary to that being offered through the formal school-based system? Are they able to clearly articulate the process of education and learning it undertakes with young people? Are they able to determine the outcomes of its work with young people? Are they able to be seen as effective contributors to the government's agenda while at the same time maintaining their unique role in the lives of young people? Should they be concerned to introduce procedures and different measuring instruments from those already in use in the formal education sector?

The current political climate has set new challenges. It questions the ability of youth work agencies to meet the needs of young people and stresses the requirements of government around the attainment of specific outcomes. Youth workers need to go back to the work of educators such as Illich (1971) and Freire (1972), educators who challenge the effectiveness of formal education in isolation by offering a broader perspective about the values of non-formal learning. They also argue that formal learning systems offer a certain type of arrangement for learning which may not suit the needs of many in society, implying that the formal context for learning offers some an opportunity for learning but not all. To overcome these failings Illich, for example, suggests that systems could be developed to 'provide the learner with new links to the world instead of continuing to funnel all educational programmes through the teacher' (1971: 73). If this approach is to be adopted more widely and its value recognised as a complementary form of education to that found in formal school-based education, alternative methods of monitoring and evaluation, involving young people as key participants, will need to be used. Rather than coaching young people to pass examinations processes will need to be further refined in order to develop in young people a critical consciousness arrived at through a process of reflection and action. It will be a system prepared not only to place the ownership of learning in the hands of the learner but also to place its valuing.

In conclusion

To influence the education debate the services and agencies urgently need to promote youth work's non-formal community-based approach. It results in education and learning opportunities being made available in a wide range of settings. This includes working with young people in specialist clubs, at centres for curriculum specialities such as art, theatre, outdoor activities, or sport, on the streets or in other areas where they meet. Non-formal education and learning involves the voluntary

commitment and active participation of young people who are involved in assessing need, designing learning experiences, locating resources and evaluating learning. This action and subsequent reflection is made possible as a result of a maturing process within which individual self-concept moves from dependency to inter-dependency assisted by an expanding bank of experience that becomes useful as a learning resource. Its approach is driven by a philosophical position underpinned by two implicit principles.

- Knowledge is assumed to be actively constructed by the learner not passively received from the environment;
- Learning is an interactive process of interpretation, integration and transformation of one's experiential world.

The creation of this environment is made possible through the use of working methods based on principles of participation and empowerment and the use of a range of methods arrived at as a result of mutual agreement between practitioners and young people. This basis of negotiation and contract serves as the foundation for a particular style of *learning* within which young people can make informed decisions about the direction of their lives for themselves. It is not a position that easily lends itself to a process of monitoring and evaluation of the style required by a government concerned with the attainment of measurable targets. Youth services and agencies need to challenge this position with their growing emphasis upon 'accreditation' measured by methodological and mechanistic methods. To do this effectively they will need to devise and promote new systems that both fit the culture of youth work and convince government and other funding sources of their reliability and validity.