**Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work**

**Overview of data**

**This document includes the following information about the project and how you might make use of it:**

* About the project – a description of the study and its background
* Data description
* Methods
* How you might use the data
* Ethics in using this data

**About the project:**

This research investigated the policy and practice of evaluation and accountability in youth work. It collaborated with young people, youth workers, managers, funders and policy makers/influencers, to understand the effects of impact measurement, and develop approaches to evaluation that are congruent with youth work practice.

This three-year research project involved 143 participants in 87 qualitative interviews and focus groups, including flexible and creative approaches to interviewing (e.g. photovoice, peer interviewing, music elicitation). The researchers also engaged in extensive participant observation in eight open youth work settings around England (youth clubs, detached / street-based youth work, and youth work aimed at specific groups with shared identities e.g. trans young people, young women, young men). The study aimed to find out how the youth impact agenda is implemented in practice, how young people and youth workers understand the value of youth work, and how evaluation and impact processes and practices are experienced and perceived by young people and youth workers. Interviews and focus groups were carried out with young people, youth workers, managers and administrators in England, as well as with policy makers, influencers and senior professionals in the UK and USA, to explore how and why 'youth impact' has become so important at this time.

***Background:***

Youth work can be life-changing for marginalised young people, developing social and cultural opportunities and contributing to wider community benefits. It takes place in youth clubs, community buildings and on the streets, and is open to all, or aimed at groups with shared experiences of oppression (e.g. young women, LGBTQ+ young people, young refugees). It is rooted in the 'voluntary principle' (i.e. that it is young people's choice to take part), enabling a more equal power dynamic than that in schools and formal social services.

In recent years, spending reductions have led to the closure of many local government youth services and charitable projects. In this context, a 2011 House of Commons Education Select Committee inquiry asked youth organisations in England to demonstrate the value of their work by developing clearer outcomes measures. In response, a new youth impact agenda emerged, instigated by government and influential third sector organisations, to promote the measurement of impact in youth settings.

While the youth impact agenda was welcomed by many youth sector bodies, some practitioner organisations argued that measuring predefined outcomes is inconsistent with youth work. Impact is associated with the quantitative measurement of planned outcomes, such as through 'pre and post' tests or randomised control trials. However, personal and social development are notoriously difficult to measure, and impact tools themselves can be inappropriate in youth work settings: for example, questionnaires asking young people about their attitudes or behaviour can be intrusive, particularly early on in a young person's engagement. Impact measurement is particularly challenging in community-based open youth work settings, where outcomes emerge gradually over time rather than being pre-defined.

The youth impact agenda quickly became influential, yet before this study there was little evidence of how it was implemented in open youth work settings or what effects it had on practice. Even less was known about how young people experience and perceive evaluation and impact mechanisms. This study aimed to build knowledge and understanding in these areas.

***Sharing the findings:***

Research findings have been shared and discussed widely, including through a short film (made by young people), five deliberative workshops (with frontline practitioners, managers, funders, and policy makers/influencers, with a final workshop bringing these perspectives together), and two practitioner conferences, as well as through conference presentations and writing (both academic and non-academic). (See link to related resources on our UK Data Service ReShare record and/or our UKRI Gateway Gateway to Research record.)

***Researchers and thanks:***

The research was undertaken by Tania de St Croix and Louise Doherty from King's College London. With grateful thanks to everyone who participated in the research, to our Advisory Group, to our wider networks in the youth sector for support and challenge, to mentors Meg Maguire and Sharon Gewirtz, to Sorele Cohen, Grace Harkin, Hannah Miller and Sophie Perry for assistance with elements of the research, and to colleagues at King’s College London.

**Data description**

The data collection included 87 qualitative interviews / focus groups (semi-structured and/or conversational / creative) with 143 people: 58 young people who engage in youth work, 59 youth workers and managers, and 26 policy makers, influencers and informants. The young people, youth workers and managers were from eight open youth work settings around England, selected to represent the diversity of open youth work (see table 1 below). The policy makers, influencers and informants were mostly from England. One was from Scotland and five from the USA; these perspectives were sought for comparative and international learning purposes.

In addition, the researchers engaged in 73 sessions of participant observation. 63 of these were in the eight youth work settings mentioned above. The remaining ten were policy-related events.

***Data not included in dataset:***

The fieldnotes and a small number of interview / focus group transcripts are not included in the shared dataset, either because it was not feasible to anonymise them, or because participants opted out of data sharing. Thus, the numbers given on this document relate to the whole project, whereas the numbers on the ReadMe file relate to the shared dataset.

**Methods**

The study took a qualitative approach based on 87 interviews and focus groups with 143 young people, youth workers and policy influencers in England (16 of whom took part in two or more interviews or focus groups), alongside 73 sessions of participant observation.

The research took place in four phases. Phase 1 involved interviews with 13 policy makers and influencers and participant observation in 10 policy-related events in 2018.

Phase 2 took place in eight open youth work settings, purposively selected to encompass a diversity of youth work approaches, locations, and organisation types. This involved an average of four visits to each of eight youth work settings in the first half of 2019, and included participating in youth work sessions, debriefs and team meetings, alongside interviews with managers and administrators, and focus groups with youth workers and young people. This phase included 14 interviews and 14 focus groups with 87 participants.

Phase three took place from December 2019 to October 2020, focusing in depth on two of the Phase 2 organisations. This enabled us to build a deeper contextualised understanding of evaluation and monitoring in these contrasting settings over time. Our longer engagement in these settings enabled greater trust, fluidity, collaboration and creativity. Data collection included a recorded tour of a youth club; sharing and discussion of photographs and songs; and a ‘paper chatterbox’ with questions selected by young people. This research phase was impacted by the Covid 19 pandemic and some participant observation, interviews and focus groups took place online. This phase included 28 interviews / focus groups with 40 participants.

Phase 4 involved 15 online semi-structured interviews with ten policy makers and influencers from the England context, and five expert informants from the USA context.

Some of the Phase 1 and 4 data was not anonymised, as some of these participants opted to speak on the record in their own names. Some of this data was partially anonymised (name redacted, organisation named) or anonymised (names and organisations redacted). The young people, youth worker and manager data from the eight youth organisations (Phases 2 and 3) is anonymised - names of individuals and organisations have been changed and only approximate locations are provided.

**How you might use the data**

We believe that this is the first open access qualitative dataset on youth work and its impact. We hope it will be useful for a range of academic, student, practitioner, policy and activist research purposes, both now and as a historical resource in the future. The data includes extensive discussion on the *value* of youth work as well as discussion on evaluation, impact measurement and accountability in and beyond youth work. For smaller and more in-depth studies – e.g. student projects - we suggest selecting one subset of data to look at, rather than the entire dataset. For example, depending on their research questions and interests, researchers might select all data from one youth organisation at one phase; or one manager interview from each of the eight organisations; or young people’s focus groups from three organisations.

**Ethics in using this data**

If you are viewing or using this data, please be aware that these interviews and focus groups are semi-structured and often conversational in nature. We suggest that using qualitative data ethically includes avoiding taking quotations out of context and thinking about the participants’ perspectives when you interpret what they have said. For example, you might imagine the participant reading what you have written – while they do not need to agree with your interpretation, would they feel you have interpreted their words fairly and reasonably?

We have done our best to anonymise transcripts where relevant. However, in the unlikely event that you think you recognise an anonymised participant’s identity, it is your responsibility to maintain confidentiality. Do not discuss the interview with that participant or divulge the participant's identity in your writing or in any other way, including by implication.

Please check with your own institution whether you need ethical approval for your study. Projects involving the accessing and further analysis of pre-existing data may require ethical clearance if you are working or studying at a research institution such as a university, particularly if individual participants may be identified (e.g. if you are using non-anonymised data from Phase 1 and/or 4).

**Thank you for engaging with this data.** As researchers, we are interested in any suggestions or feedback on the dataset or how it might be used. Do feel free to contact us.

### Table 1: Participating organisations

| **Organisation pseudonym** | **Location** | **Main youth work approach observed / discussed** | **Organisation type** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Dove Street Youth Project | North West; urban | Detached; faith-based; girls group; boys group | Charity |
| Fairlight Youth Club | London; urban | Youth club | Local authority |
| Journeys | London / England | Trans youth groups | Charity, social enterprise |
| Melham Youth Service | London; urban | Detached, mobile and outreach | Local authority youth service |
| Opal Youth Club | London; urban | Youth club | Charity |
| Riverpath | South West; rural, coastal, and urban | Youth clubs | Charity, social enterprise |
| Seaside Youth Centre | South East; coastal | Youth club; online youth club | Charity |
| The Vaults | North East; urban | Youth clubs | Charity |