

Navigating youth work: evidencing the long-term impact of youth work

Summary

We are in the early stages of planning to investigate the long-term impact of open youth work. The research will aim to evidence and articulate youth work's long-term impact, including less tangible aspects that are seen as difficult to measure or explain. Crucially, the research will collaborate with young people, youth workers, policy makers, funders and youth sector organisations throughout (including in the planning stages). Taking a mixed methods approach, it will engage with contradiction and complexity, avoiding over-claiming or simplifying youth work's contribution.

The research will aim to contribute to knowledge and understanding on youth work's long-term impact, provide evidence for policy and practice, and engage youth workers and young people as partners and co-researchers. This summary has been prepared to inform consultation as part of preparing a research proposal and funding bid. The ideas outlined here are provisional and we welcome your responses, thoughts and challenges.

Rationale: why is this research needed?

There has been a recent resurgence in cross-party support for youth work in England, and a promise of £500 million investment as part of the 2019 Spending Round. However, youth work has suffered from a decade of cuts to provision and infrastructure, and there are new challenges in the light of Covid-19 and its health, social and economic impacts. Cuts have disproportionately affected open and anti-oppressive youth work, including youth clubs, detached work and identity-based groups.

It is well established that the lack of evidence of the long-term impact of youth work disadvantages the sector's ability to attract government, charitable and philanthropic funds (McGregor 2015; Dickson et al 2013). Without high quality evidence that can be used by policy makers, funders and organisations, the burden falls on individual organisations to evidence the impact of youth work; this can lead to evaluation and monitoring that distorts practice and reinforces unequal power relations (Doherty & de St Croix 2019). This research would contribute to understandings of social justice in education that do not reduce its impact only to outcomes; we are also interested in integral and intrinsic value – aspects that are often neglected or seen as difficult to evidence (Griffiths 2012).

Overall aim:

- To advance knowledge and understanding of the long-term impact of open youth work.

Draft research objectives:

- 1) To investigate youth work participants' perceptions of the impact of open youth work on their lives over time:
 - a) To articulate youth work's impact and value, as understood and experienced by current and former participants when they reflect on their past experience.
 - b) To build understanding of the contextual factors (including policy, practice, temporal, economic, relational and geographical / spatial factors) affecting youth work's impact.
- 2) To provide robust and timely evidence to inform policy, funding bodies, professional training, youth organisations, and practice.
- 3) To plan, carry out and disseminate the research in collaboration with youth workers, young people, youth organisations, policy makers, funders, and key sector organisations.

- 4) To build research capacity and skills in the sector, including amongst professional youth workers, youth work volunteers, and young people.

Potential methods

We are committed to participatory action research and co-production principles, in which there are options for youth workers, young people and other collaborators to be involved as co-researchers, advisors, critics, and active participants. Our initial plan encompasses the following methods:

1. **Longitudinal research with young people** currently engaged in open youth work. This could take the form of **qualitative interviews** with young people annually over the duration of the research (potentially carried out by youth workers or peers). This may be supplemented with interviews with youth workers and other significant people in their lives.
2. **Life history interviews with adults** who are former youth work participants, discussing the contribution of youth work to their lives (not focusing narrowly on 'outcomes' but also including reflections on youth work's less tangible contributions to their lives).
3. **A creative online questionnaire**, co-designed with young people, youth workers and other stakeholders, and widely distributed by national, local and grassroots organisations.

We are open to alternative approaches, and keen to try new and emerging research methods. We seek to share plans and findings with researchers, practitioners and students, including internationally, to avoid duplication and build stronger evidence to support open youth work.

Proposed scope

Our initial plan is to focus on open youth work (including youth clubs, detached and street-based work, online youth work, and open-ended youth work with groups of young people who have a shared identity, life experience or interest). It is envisaged that the research will take place in England with some cross-UK and international comparisons and/or collaboration.

Collaboration

We are keen to collaborate with those who are most knowledgeable about and affected by the issues we want to research. We are initially considering a focus on selected contrasting regions of England, although some elements of the research could be carried out more widely. We are collaborating with partner organisations to ensure that the research is seen as relevant and necessary; does not duplicate; adds to knowledge and understanding; is user-friendly; and is rigorous in its methodology. As part of planning we will explore what practical, financial and other considerations are needed to support youth organisations, youth workers and young people – especially those from marginalised communities – to take part.

Potential timeline

- February-August 2020: Background research and collaborative planning.
- July-September 2020: Bid writing. Result expected several months later.
- Summer 2021: Project begins (funding dependant), to run for three to five years.