



Title: Putting collective reflective dialogue at the heart of the evaluation process.

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Introduction

This paper examines the experiences of a group of youth workers as they implemented an innovation participatory evaluation process. The participatory evaluation was developed and implemented as one strand of a multi-stranded mixed methods commissioned evaluation of the organisation's grant-funded work. The aim of the paper is to provide valuable insights into the nature and practice of evaluation, and in particular into the relationship between evaluation and reflective practice which is the focus of this paper.

Managerialism: A hostile environment for reflective practice and evaluation.

Managerialism can be understood as the product of neo-liberal political rationalities and business management approaches in the workplace (MacKinnon 2000) and its aim is to bring about organisational change in order to meet the competitive challenge of a global economy. It is characterised by the assessment of quality using external, objective benchmarks generally involving quantitative methods such as performance indicators and externally imposed targets. Professionals are no longer self-regulating and self-controlling but held accountable. This has impacted on the nature of professionalism and some argue that in this context the professional is viewed as a technician (Hodkinson and Issitt 1995). This shift can be seen explicitly in regards to how practitioners both view and are viewed in relation to evaluation and reflective practice, this is explored later. Spenceley (2006) argues that the primary focus of the professional no longer lies with the provision of a service but in proving the 'value' of that service through a range of externally set outcome measures. Reinders (2008: 568) adds weight to this argument by asserting that 'traditional professional practices have been invaded by a set of different values', concluding that managerialism presents serious challenges to social professionals with regard to remaining faithful to the values of their profession.

Evans (2008:27) challenges what some might describe as determinism in relation to the managerialism / professionalism debate by arguing that 'To be real, professionalism has to be something that people – professionals - actually "do", not simply something the government or any other agency wants them to do...' This provides a valuable reminder that if we accept

that professionalism is a social construct then professionals are potentially key players in that construction ‘accepting or resisting external control and asserting or denying their autonomy’ (*ibid*: 23). Hilferty’s (2008) perspective is congruent with this; she highlights the connection between agency and enacted professionalism by asserting that both require a knowing participation. However many commentators purport that managerialism threatens professional autonomy by reducing the number of opportunities for professionals to develop or express individual or collective autonomy (Mahony and Hextall 2000, Ball 2003, Osgood 2006).

The influence of managerialism on the process of evaluation has been powerful and the emergence of evidence-based practice and its rapid expansion across a number of areas such as social work, education and youth work needs to be understood against a background of managerialism (Trinder 2000, Hammersley 2001). Trinder’s feminist critique argues that evidence-based practice is ‘a covert method of rationing resources, overtly simplistic and constrains professional autonomy’ (*ibid* 2000:2). Hammersley (2001: UP) makes a pertinent point when he states ‘the definition of what is effective, of what counts as ‘success’ will not be something they [professionals] have any control over’. The role of the professional in the evaluation process moves from ‘researcher of their own practice’ to data collectors.

Practitioners may feel alienated from evaluation as a result of an incompatibility with their practice at an epistemological level (Everitt and Hardiker 1996, Cooper 2011). Many feel that evaluation is a management task, carried out for the benefit of funders and regulators (Ellis 2008). Others have argued that practitioners experience exclusion from the process of evaluation (Issitt and Spence 2005, Beresford and Branfield 2006). This separation between practitioners and evaluation is of real concern as it runs the risk of devaluing practice knowledge. Whilst Evans and Hardy (2010: 154) argue that ‘evaluating in practice (...) is aimed primarily at strengthening practitioner knowledge’ when evaluation is perceived and practiced within the narrow frame of accountability this is clearly not the outcome. In order to address this, it is necessary to consider other approaches to evaluation that fit with the ethos and values of practice and that enable practitioners to take a more active role in evaluating their own practice. It was this necessity that prompted the research underpinning this paper. The aim of the research was to design and develop an innovative approach to evaluation that would support a re-engagement of practitioners with the process of evaluation.

Developing an alternative approach

Fetterman's (2001) vision of evaluation in the 21st century combines critical and collaborative relationships, it is a process in which 'Funders, program staff members and participants will acquire the capacity to monitor and assess critical aspects of their own performance' (ibid: 381). In an attempt to realise this vision, the evaluation methodology was built on foundations of appreciative inquiry and participatory evaluation.

Appreciative

Appreciative inquiry is a strength-based approach that takes a positive stance in an effort to counterbalance the deficit discourse of problem-solving (Cooperrider and Srivastva 1987, Zandee and Cooperrider 2008). Appreciative inquiry, as a form of constructionism in action, works from the premise that if we ask questions about problems we create a reality of problems, if we ask questions about 'what works' we create a reality of potential (Reed 2007). Appreciative reflection refers to 'the development of action and learning processes based on valuing and building upon what works, what makes us feel good, what we perceive as positive, and what gives us a sense of strength and well-being in the work we do' (Marchi 2011:181).

Participatory Evaluation

Participative evaluation can be seen as an ongoing process of collective action through the inclusion of a range of stakeholders in reflection, negotiation, collaboration and knowledge creation. A defining characteristic of participatory evaluation is the effort developed by a group of people working together in an interactive manner with the focus on the process, rather than on results (Suárez-Herrera *et al.* 2009). The commitment to local control and capacity building means that participatory evaluation has the potential to enable practitioners to generate their own learning and support reflective practice (Hall and Hall 2004). As Springett (2001:148) argues 'If evaluation is viewed as critical praxis, then learning and change become the focus. The emphasis is no longer on proving but on improving.' Suárez-Herrera *et al.* (2009) highlight the learning potential of participative evaluation approaches, asserting that the interaction and communication between stakeholders engaged in evaluative

networks constitute a superior way of learning. A participatory evaluation process requires openness to dialogue, critical reflection and negotiation.

Adopting a participatory evaluation methodology requires a return to reflective practice. Reflective practice has received a great deal of attention in literature (Smyth 1992) and yet there is still much debate, and some confusion about the concept (Kinsella 2007, Wilson *et al.* 2007). Others have argued that reflective practice had become 'fashionable' (Peel 2005), a 'bandwagon' (Hunt 2006), an 'ideal' (Ottesen 2007), and a 'buzzword' (Thompson and Pascal 2012). Managerialism is seen by some as a major threat to reflective practice as the emphasis on management control through target setting erodes professional autonomy and creates a working environment hostile to reflective learning (Baldwin 2004). Practitioners are wary, even fearful, of exposing 'weaknesses' to others, perhaps especially to line-managers within a performance-orientated culture (Ottesen 2007). This sense of fear limits the learning potential of reflective practice and the development of practice overall.

Whilst much is written about reflective practice as an individual pursuit, the collective dimension of reflective practice remains underexplored and Marshall (2008) calls for a more elaborate understanding of the social nature of reflection. Verbal interaction with peers can develop reflective practice (Collin and Karsenti 2011). McCormack and Kennelly (2011) argue that reflection can move from being a solitary, individual activity to become on-going critical, collaborative conversations. In their study they found the use of stories as a starting point for critical inquiry beneficial in that writing, reading and listening to stories of learning and teaching experiences helped their participants (academics) to 'see into themselves to see what they may not have seen previously, or to see the familiar through different eyes' (McCormack and Kennelly 2011: 518). Allards *et al.* (2007) support the claim that use of narratives and reflection can illuminate standards of practice. They used a range of activities, the one most relevant here is what they termed 'a mini-case institute' where participants were encouraged to value their own voices and explore their assumptions. In their analysis, Allards *et al.* (2007) argue that active engagement in the process deepened the participants' reflective practice; their study demonstrated the value of narrative and dialogue for uncovering assumptions. Narratives honour the voice and experience of the practitioner and that this in turn enhances the practitioner's sense of efficacy. Collective reflection intensifies professional development and according to Allards *et al.* (2007) the inquiry process is enhanced through collective dialogue.

Ng and Tan (2009) usefully remind us that taking a collective approach, in itself, is not sufficient to ensure transformative learning. Their persuasive argument, based on their experience of the teaching profession in Singapore, is that use of sense-making frameworks that are underpinned by an objective and rationale worldview lead to learning that is mainly technical in nature and restricted to immediate practice concerns. Their key message is that whilst practitioners should be encouraged to engage with critical reflection, opportunities for them to do so need to be deliberately structured in. For them, this requires a shift from a focus on pre-specified standards and performance indicators to a questioning of educational goals and values and qualitative indicators which emphasise qualities of judgement, decision-making and practice wisdom. Ng and Tan's view that reflection within communities of practice can be as susceptible to the influence of managerialism as individual reflection is useful and support Brookfield's (1995:8) assertion that 'reflection is not, by definition, critical'. A key characteristic of critical reflective learning is that it requires one to move away from the immediate to take a broader view (Ng and Tan 2009). Doing so enables reflective practice to shift from problem-solving towards active collective reflection on the educational goals and values and issues of equity and social justice.

The Evaluation Process

The evaluation process used in this study is based on the 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) technique (Davies 1996). The MSC technique involves the generation of a number of participants' Significant Change stories during a given time period and the systematic collective analysis of the stories (see Davies and Dart 2005 for detailed information about the technique).

The technique was developed in response to the inadequacies of conventional evaluation processes in capturing programme impacts that are difficult to quantify, and hence it seemed entirely appropriate for use in a youth work context. Its focus on learning rather than accountability (Willetts and Crawford 2007) meant that it offered real potential to re-engage youth workers in the process of evaluation. The technique had not been used in a youth work context in the UK before and thus required adaptations to ensure its suitability. A central aim, as stated earlier, was to develop the level of participation of the youth workers in evaluation and this was addressed by adaptations to the story generation stage. The MSC

technique, as with other participative evaluation methods, is aligned with the interpretivist paradigm, it does not seek to identify ‘right ways’ of doing things, it does not seek to ‘generalise and transport’ rather it seeks to develop insight and understanding and to develop professional practice based on this increased understanding.

A four stage cycle was designed (See diagram 1).

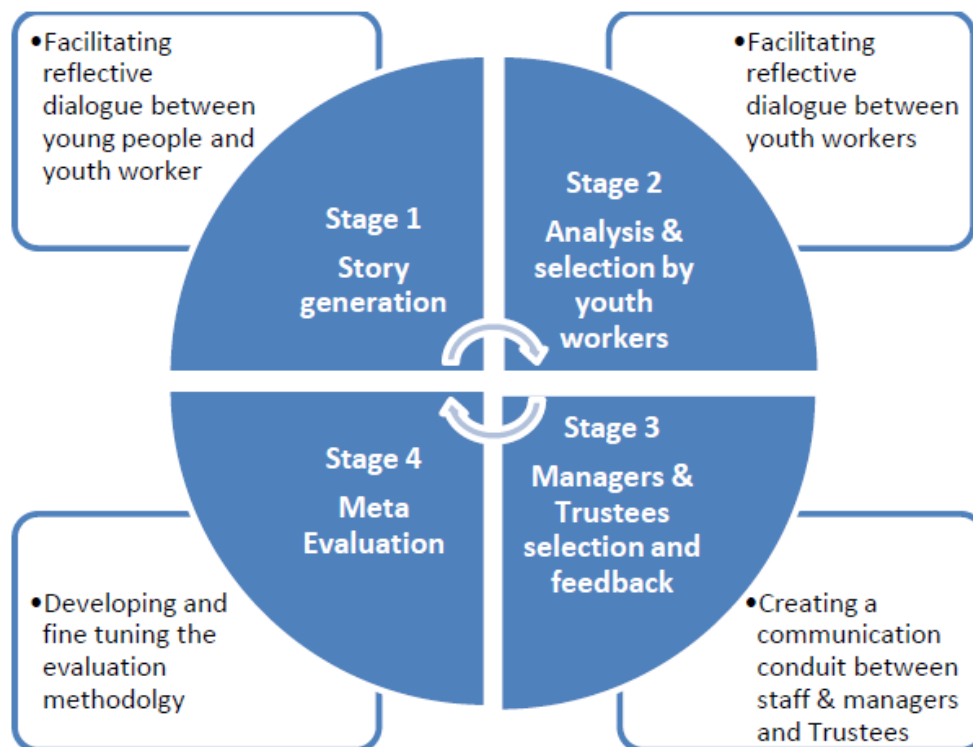


Diagram 1: The 4 Stage Evaluation Design

Stage 1 involved story-generation. A Significant Change story is the response to the open question:

Looking back over the last month or so, what do you think was the most significant change that occurred for you as a result of coming here?

The youth workers engaged young people attending their projects in conversation, asked this question and recorded the responses in a variety of ways. The young person was encouraged to explain why the change was significant to them. This promoted reflective dialogue between the young person and the youth worker.

Stage 2 involved the collective analysis of the collected Significant Change stories and the selection of a Most Significant Change story for each domain. This stage began with the

sorting of stories into groups or domains. Domains were not pre-set and were determined by the youth workers working with their generated stories. Sorting the stories and assigning domain names led to in-depth reflection and analysis and was a challenging part of the process for the youth workers. The MSC technique was adapted at this point to include an input from the youth worker who had generated the story, allowing them to add context and professional commentary to the young person's story. This supported the engagement in reflective dialogue with peers about their understanding of the young person's story and their intervention and enabled the co-construction of stories. The increased involvement of the youth workers in story generation raised their voice in the process of evaluation (Jackson and Kassam 1998). Reaching consensus on the Most Significant Change story for each domain was the task for the youth workers. The reason for their selection was added to the original story and the completed stories were then passed to the Managers and Trustees Group (MTG).

In stage 3 the Managers and Trustees Group (MTG) discussed, reviewed and selected the MSC story for that cycle. This stage was completed by the return of the MSC story to the youth workers group together with the Managers and Trustees' reason for selecting that particular story. Stage 4, the concluding stage, involved a process of meta-evaluation. This involved reviewing and refining the process of story generation.

The evaluation process was studied over a period of a year, during which the cyclical process was conducted three times. Each cycle lasted for approximately three months. The evaluation methodology produced a collection of Significant Change stories which using the words of the young people and youth workers involved provided rich descriptions of the impact of interventions on the lives of young people. This was the product, useful for demonstrating the value and effectiveness of the organisation's work to its funders complementing the quantitative analysis of its outputs. This however is only part of the story, the process of the evaluation provided learning opportunities far beyond this by deliberately structuring in reflective practice opportunities for all involved (Ng and Tan 2009).

Research Methodology

This interpretive study focused on the experiences of eight youth workers employed in a voluntary sector youth organisation in England. Data were gathered via individual semi-structured interviews with the youth workers prior to implementing the participatory

evaluation process and again after implementing three cycles of the process. As a result on staff changes during the life of the project thirteen 1:1 in-depth interviews were conducted, each lasting for approximately an hour. The focus of the interview was on the individual practitioner's experience of engaging the participatory evaluation process with that aim of collecting data that would offer some insight into any changes that were identified by the youth workers in relation to their perceptions and practice of evaluation across the duration of the study. All interviews were conducted in the youth workers' work setting at a time convenient to them, audio-recorded and transcribed. A standardised structured interview approach was rejected in favour of a semi-structured approach as this allowed the youth workers to use their unique ways of defining the world, it assumed no fixed sequence of questions was suitable to all and it allowed the youth workers to raise issues of importance to them (Silverman 1993).

The analysis approach used in this study was informed by interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) which is well suited to researching 'unexplored territory' (Reid et al. 2005:23) and because it assumes that participants seek to interpret their experiences into some form that is understandable to them (Brocki and Wearden 2006). The process was iterative and involved 'reduction, expansion, revision, creativity and innovation' (Smith et al. 2009: 81). An inductive thematic analysis led to the identification of a number of emergent themes; the focus in this paper is on the way in which stage 3 of the evaluation methodology promoted and enabled collective reflective practice, enhanced a sense of well being and positively impacted on professional autonomy.

Findings and discussion

Engaging with reflective practice

Many of the youth workers found using the participatory evaluation re-united them with reflective practice. The realisation that they always seemed to be focused on the next event or the next activity made some of them question their practice:

I think it makes you realise, sometimes you just look forward all the time, next project, next month's sessions, looking for funding, starting up things, (...) but it made me stop and think what has happened over the last month and be a bit more reflective cos I think, when you stop having to be reflective, when you stop doing the degree basically,

(laughs) that part of you shuts down a little bit and it was quite nice to be [reflective again]. (Ali)

sometimes you just slog on and don't really think about what you're doing, or all the stuff you've done (...) that kind of gets forgotten (Beth)

reflection is good to do and I should make more time to actually reflect on what we've done and actually talk to them [young people] about what we've done more (Dave)

It is not possible from these extracts to attribute the cause or causes for these youth workers to have become so focused on the future, on activity to the detriment of reflection. For Ali, it could be suggested that once she did not have to demonstrate reflective practice to others she chose not to do it. This may add support to the view that the value of reflective practice to practitioners is questionable (Cornford 2002). Alternatively, it may be that her time-poverty, resulting from competing demands, such as the need to initiate new projects as a result of short-term funding, may have meant that her time to engage in reflective practice had been reduced. Beth's use of the phrase '*you just slog on*' indicates a sense of 'head down, hard work'; this is not a state that is conducive to reflective practice. Time constraints are a recognised barrier to reflective practice (Fade 2004, Morris and Stew 2007, Thompson and Thompson 2008): when workloads are high, reflective time can be seen as a luxury yet according to Thompson and Pascal (2012: 320) 'the busier we are, the more reflective we need to be'. Interestingly, the youth workers commented on their own reflective practice in their second interviews, not in the first. This may indicate that the participatory evaluation highlighted the gap between espoused theories and theories-in-use (Argyris and Schon 1974) in relation to the youth workers' engagement with reflective practice.

The participatory evaluation clearly had illuminative powers. Emma felt it had enabled the workers to '*find out stuff they didn't know before*' and some youth workers expressed surprise at the outcomes identified by young people when 'telling their story' in terms of what young people valued:

sitting down with those young people and asking that sort of question [most significant change question] and then actually what came out was almost completely different than what you were thinking in your own head. (Beth)

just reminiscing [with the young person] about that experience, for both of us was really interesting, and her perspective of that experience was different to what mine was, so

that was interesting as well, different view of the outcome and a different view of what she got out of it than what I expected. (Helen)

This can be interpreted to suggest that the participatory evaluation spotlighted the youth workers' assumptions about the outcomes of their work activity. The target culture has a tendency to push towards assuming outcomes. This illumination may have restored the youth workers' desire to reflect with young people, and to recognise the dangers of assuming outcomes. This finding offers support for Allards *et al.* (2007) who assert that narratives, in this case the co-constructed stories, can be a useful vehicle for uncovering assumptions.

Reflective practice is associated with professionalism and has become a mandatory professional competency in many initial professional education programmes. For some it is a central aspect of being professional (Schon 1983, Peel 2005). However, the changing concept of professionalism with its rational-technical focus on competence is a barrier to developing reflective practice (Ottesen 2007, Evetts 2005). It could be viewed that the shift towards being monitored and measured according to externally imposed outcomes has in some ways removed the need for reflection. The pressure to take a technical orientation (Wellington and Austin 1996) to reflective practice is increased by performativity. The youth workers in this study responded positively to the centrality of reflection in the participatory evaluation indicating perhaps, the unsatisfying nature of becoming a technician.

Collective reflective dialogue

The opportunity to spend time together as a staff team had declined for these youth workers over the period of the study and the collaborative nature of the participatory evaluation was appreciated. Ali placed high value on peer space and, interestingly, she likened the evaluation process to a supervision-type process rather than to an evaluation process, perhaps suggesting its reflective, educative and supportive nature. Meaningful reflective conversations can sustain and nourish practitioners (Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998).

Fiona talked about 'taking time out' together and indicated that time out to reflect was often missing from their working lives:

really interesting to work as a group and actually take the time out to think about all those stories, that can get missed quite a lot of the time. (Fiona)

She went on to discuss the process of story selection, and expressed surprise at the depth of the discussion during this stage of the participatory evaluation which may be indicative of a lack of in-depth discussion and reflection elsewhere:

it was nice as a staff group to find out what we all thought about the different stories that were collected, (...) and a lot more came out of it than I probably anticipated – I thought we'd all just look at them and go 'yeah, that one, that one, that one – done' but there was so much to it and it was far more complex, (Fiona)

Emma elaborated on this in-depth discussion as follows:

discussing why a story should go through and why it shouldn't and finding out what everyone thought, either individually or as a group as to what is distance travelled and what is an achievement for a young person and working out who has come the furthest and who has achieved the most

These are extremely complex issues. They demonstrate a key characteristic of critical reflective learning in that they illustrate the move away from the immediate to take a broader view of practice. This in turn enables the shift from problem-solving towards active collective reflection on the educational goals and values and issues of equity and social justice (Ng and Tan 2009). Discussion is a collaborative activity that can illuminate and challenge assumptions (Allards *et al.* 2007). Time spent in collective reflective discussion is beneficial for the development of professional knowledge, confidence and practice. Seeing peers as key contributors to the learning process develops a supportive environment in which both individual self-evaluation and collective critical reflection can be nurtured and ultimately can become a 'safe part(s) of professional practice' (David *et al.* 2000: 713). This sense of safety, vital for learning, is not generally associated with performativity cultures and practices.

For some youth workers, the time spent in the group sessions was a way to combat the isolation and pressure they experienced as individual workers:

[It was good for me] to see all those projects as a whole cos its all different projects coming together and sometimes you're quite in the zone with yours, I think, just to see what people had done and what young people had identified as good. (Beth)

I think, you forget about other projects sometimes so it was quite nice listening to the [other] stories, (...) it gives you the wider awareness cos the work is so intense you can be very inward about your own work, on lots of different levels it sparked lots of conversations and just thinking a little bit more outwardly rather than quite so inward, its good. (Clair)

The benefits of using a collective approach to evaluation, extending the process of evaluation by drawing in and on the knowledge of peers supported the development of a shared understanding of practice which in turn may support the development of a shared professional identity (Healy 2009). This adds support to claim made by Allards *et al.* (2007) that collective reflection intensifies professional development.

Enhanced well-being

Most of the youth workers expressed increased feelings of value and self-worth as a consequence of using the evaluation methodology. These feelings were associated with a sense of ‘making a difference’ to young people’s lives and a sense that their efforts were worthwhile. The appreciative nature of the participatory evaluation meant that the youth workers were seeking out positive change stories and through sharing these they became aware of the range and scope of the positive work that was happening in the organisation:

a bit of a pat on the back because of the things that are happening for young people (...)it’s the time we’ve spent talking about it, time spent reflecting and making ourselves realise that the work we’re doing is really important. (Ali)

Using the evaluation methodology required a shift in mindset for the youth workers ‘away from confessional tales and towards conversations about success’ (Ghaye *et al.* 2008) that both legitimised and encouraged the sharing of ‘good work’ stories. This raised the question as to whether the youth workers were able to recognise their own achievements and the achievements of their peers prior to using the participatory evaluation or whether accountability-focused evaluation systems conceal rather than celebrate achievement. Ali’s use of the phrase ‘*making ourselves realise*’ is interesting and perhaps indicative of a need to counter a deficit discourse. It does appear that the evaluation process supported an altering of the youth workers’ social construction of reality (Bushe 2007, Reed 2007)) and this is likely to reinforce effort in the future and help sustain practitioners during difficult times. The boosting nature of the methodology can be seen in Clair’s extract below:

it has made me feel that actually there was some really good stories that came out of there and you know, even when it really crappy, for young people it is valuable for them (Clair)

The energy boosting aspect resulting from the appreciative nature of the participatory evaluation was expressed by Helen:

finding that actually it's really lovely to spend some time doing this, it feels good and I leave the meetings elated and feeling stress-free instead of leaving the meetings feeling 'arrrrgh, I've got loads to do' it is helping us as individuals. (Helen)

These extracts provide support for the view that participatory forms of evaluation can result in a renewed feeling of pride and excitement about the profession and in a revitalised sense of oneself as a professional (Dadds, 1995; McLaughlin *et al.* 2004).

Supporting professional autonomy

For some of the youth workers the evaluation methodology provided a means of communicating with others. The following extracts illustrate a level of support that they felt in terms of using their voice. Fiona reflected on the upward communication involved in the story generation and selection stage where they, the youth workers, were required to include their professional knowledge about their interventions in the story. This provided a means of informing managers and trustees in the final stage of selecting the most significant story. She imagines a time when workers can provide managers with insights into the work and the possibility of informing the future direction of the work:

in an ideal world, you'd have these kind of conversations with managers in respect of giving them an insight into the kind of work that's going on in a bit more depth like we were doing, cos they write the bids at the end of the day you know, it is linked (Fiona)

George also felt the stories were a way of informing managers about what was happening on the ground:

There are issues that go in the stories that I actually want senior management to understand what is happening.

Ali saw the stories as potential 'ammunition' in the fight against externally imposed targets:

it will give us ammunition to justify the work that we do, when you're told from above that you can't do something anymore, you'll be able to turn around and say it might not be hitting those targets but this is what its generating

The three extracts demonstrate the empowering potential of the participatory evaluation and support the view these forms of evaluation can restore a sense of professionalism and power in the sense of having a voice (McLaughlin *et al.* 2004). The adaptation of the MSC technique to involve the youth worker as co-constructor of the significant change stories formalised their

inclusion in an attempt to address the feelings of alienation and exclusion from accountability-based forms of evaluation (Everitt and Hardiker 1995, Beresford and Branfield 2006). The co-authorship, between young person and youth worker, firmly placed control in their hands, raised their voices together and provided a sense of empowerment for the workers. The indication that the youth workers felt that the stories could inform management and challenge external stakeholders suggests that using this form of evaluation could enable a move towards a form of democratic and dialogical professionalism (Avis 2003). It seems clear that using the participatory evaluation raised workers' esteem and confidence, Dave captured this when he said:

the fact is you've got something there that you can actually look at and say 'wow, we've made a difference' so it actually reinforces your work, makes the workforce a lot happier, we're doing the right thing and it gives us confidence in what we're doing

Having a means by which to justify actions and beliefs is important as it enables a feeling of empowerment and of being valued (Brookfield 1995). The 'appreciative gaze' (Ghaye *et al.* 2008) of this form of evaluation turns the focus to the things that worked, countering the effects of performativity (Ball 2003) and the deficit-based discourse associated with accountability and managerialism. The increased sense of self-belief can help support professionals to use their agency (Osgood 2006).

Using Mezirow's (2000:7) definition of transformative learning as:

the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action

it is proposed that, in this particular study, the evaluation methodology used can be seen to have been transformative in that it re-frames evaluation as a more democratic and participatory practice which is akin to the ethos of youth work. Importantly, this enabled a re-framing of reflective practice from an individual pursuit of 'problem-identification and rectification' to one of critical collective dialogue based on narratives of practice.

Limitations and Opportunities

The evaluation methodology has limitations; the MSC technique on which it is based, was developed in the field of overseas development and with adults, and both of these raise questions about transferability to a youth work project in the UK. The generation of stories may raise concerns about validity of the process, of leading or manipulating young people and issues of sampling. These issues were discussed throughout as the youth workers developed their skills, understanding and approach. The notion of ‘generating’ rather than ‘collecting’ stories was introduced to make the ‘researcher involvement’ in interpretivist research transparent.

The use of purposive sampling can be questioned in terms of reliability, however whereas purposive sampling can be seen as a weakness in the positivist paradigm, it is seen as strength in interpretivist study. It is entirely appropriate to select ‘excellent informants’ (Spradley 1979) as these people are the ones who can tell us the most about the question we seek to understand. Selecting young people based on prior knowledge that they have experienced a change as a result of being involved with the organisation was purposefully ‘biased’, not to make the organisation look good but in order to learn from those cases of good practice (Patton 2002). It is important here to state that this evaluation methodology was used alongside other methodologies; it is not presented as ‘the only or best’ form of evaluation but rather as one approach in a pluralistic frame.

This research has provided some interesting insights into the experience of engaging with a participatory, appreciative evaluation methodology. The evaluation methodology drew on the trusting relationships between the youth workers and the young people, and between the youth workers themselves to enable questioning discussions, the open sharing of information and the achievement of consensual and mutual understanding. Further inquiry, particularly in relation to enabling factors, is needed, for example developing greater understanding of the social factors in terms of enabling contexts and group relations. The methodology clearly had a positive impact on practitioners’ sense of well-being, but further study is necessary to establish whether this is sustainable. There was no evidence of Ng and Tan’s (2009) concern that reflective communities are as susceptible to managerialism as individual forms of reflective practice. This may be related to the ‘newness’ of the methodology and hence would need to be considered in the long term.

Conclusions

In summary, this paper demonstrates how the participatory, appreciative evaluation methodology supported and enabled a return to critical reflective practice. The active engagement in the participatory evaluation process deepened the youth workers' reflective practice in similar ways to the participants in the studies by Allards *et al.* (2007) and McCormack and Kennelly (2011). The empowering nature of participatory evaluation has been made evident in the exploration of the impact of positive feelings associated with focusing on 'good' work on the youth workers. It has been argued that these impacts supported and enabled the youth workers to be active agents in shaping their professional practice and professional contexts (Evans 2008). The nourishing nature of an appreciative lens is seen in the ways in which the youth workers talk about their experiences of engaging in the evaluation methodology. This study adds support to view the use of narrative in evaluation honours the voice and experience of the practitioner and in turn enhances their sense of efficacy (Allards *et al.* 2007). Developing negotiated and shared meaning is an important part of a joint process of responding to uncertainty (Thompson and Pascal 2012).

The appreciative, participatory methodology developed and implemented in the research project enabled young people and youth workers to identify the impact of youth work, inverting the top-down model of accountability-focussed evaluation so closely related to managerialism. The process of 'raising voices', linked with participatory evaluation processes (Allards *et al.* 2007, Jackson and Kassam 1998, McLaughlin *et al.* 2004) supported the youth workers to recognise the value of their work, boosting their confidence and esteem. The collaborative action of 'sharing stories' supported their sense of self, professionalism and, for some, combated feeling of isolation and exhaustion. The collective reflective discussions involved in stage 2 of the methodology energised the workers and provided a peer support space.

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