

Transformative Evaluation: An Interpretive Study of Youth Workers' Experience of Using Participatory Evaluation

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Abstract

This interpretivist research aims to add to the body of knowledge in relation to the impact of managerialism in the youth work sector by investigating the ways in which youth workers and their practices are influenced by systems of accountability, externally imposed targets and measurement. Evaluation in this context is reduced to upward compliance; the professional no longer responsible for defining good practice or determining the outcomes of their work. The concern that the learning and development functions of evaluation are lost warranted the research. Participatory evaluation can offer resistance to evaluation as 'technology of power' because of its ongoing process of collective action, reflection and knowledge creation.

Using an 'insider' methodology, a new participatory evaluation methodology was developed and implemented to explore how this different approach influenced the youth workers' sense of self and practice. Data were gathered via individual semi-structured interviews before and after the implementation of the participatory evaluation and an inductive thematic analysis was used to identify emergent themes.

This research contributes to knowledge by showing that youth workers have been seriously challenged by managerialism, and performativity particularly in relation to maintaining their personal and professional values. It confirms that they view accountability metrics as inadequate for capturing the complexity and demonstrating the value of their work. Of particular significance is the knowledge that this study adds in regard to the design and use of participatory evaluation. A new way of thinking about evaluation is proposed. Transformative Evaluation (TE) offers a methodology that supports the learning and development functions of evaluation. In addition, TE was seen to enhance practice outcomes, raise worker confidence and well-being potentially supporting a more agentic response to change.

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