

THREATENING YOUTH WORK : THE ILLUSION OF OUTCOMES

Tony Taylor, the Coordinator of the In Defence of Youth Work Campaign, is interviewed by Marilyn Taylor, a youth worker for some years herself before lecturing in Social Psychology.

Obviously I'm conscious that your hostility to the discourse of outcomes goes back a long way and is at the core of the Campaign's founding Open Letter. Like it or not, though, the National Youth Agency [NYA] and the Local Government Association [LGA] have just this year produced further advice on justifying youth work utilising the Young Foundation's [YF] framework of outcomes for young people.[1] Don't the advocates of outcomes-based practice remain very much in the driving seat.

Too true and in danger of driving youth work over a precipice of their own making. Stifling in its repetition the mantra of outcomes threatens to drown out alternative voices. It is taken for granted common-sense of our time. Those who peddle its propaganda, argue that we need to show that youth work works, that we must define and measure what it is we do. They claim that there is no other option. They cannot allow that their utilitarian project might be undermined by a profound contradiction. Not everything that is vital to being human can be mathematically measured and compared, not least, as we shall see, the very make-up of our personalities 'who we are' and 'who we might become'. Nevertheless Bernard Davies was moved - following a piece of research he did a few years ago - to ponder whether there is a youth work manager left who might envisage a practice with young people not harnessed to prescribed outcomes.[2] It seems we cannot contemplate an encounter with young people that is not scripted in advance.

Such a scenario within which it becomes bizarre to think otherwise is an example of what Gramsci called 'hegemony'.[3] It is a way of looking at the world so dominant and accepted that dissidents are seen as somehow unhinged, 'a crust short of a pie' as we would say in our home-town of Wigan.

Yet, as you say, the Open Letter, which launched our In Defence of Youth Work [IDYW] campaign four years ago, argued explicitly that the a priori imposition of predictable outcomes upon informal education with young people is the antithesis of what we claim to be our person-centred tradition. [4] In doing so we were expressing in agitational form what Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith had been saying for a decade.[5] This is a tradition which is volatile and voluntary, negotiated through and shaped by young people's agendas not just the State's. It is a tradition founded on a relationship forged from below, not insisted upon from above. Against the odds our cry struck a chord that continues to resonate.

But isn't the constant criticism of IDYW one which argues that you and your supporters are hiding your heads in the sands, refusing to embrace the new and innovative, clinging onto an idealistic tradition past its sell-by date?

That we are stuck in the past is a jibe we frequently hear. We have been labelled idealists, romantics, even 'loose cannons'! Indeed one leading figure blogged that some of us are 'drowning in history', clutching onto redundant copies of Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', confused as to whether we love or hate the State and disinterested in young people's education and welfare.[6] Unable it would appear to see our outcomes from our outputs, whilst still claiming to be radical, we are allegedly blocking the way forward and the emergence of new blood. All of which is a trifle unfair on the passionate younger workers in our ranks!

The argument that the advocates of measurement in youth work are pioneers breaking fresh ground is far from convincing and certainly lacks any sense of history. The present attempt via the

outcomes agenda to impose order upon the unruly world of youth work is nothing but the latest expression of an underpinning tendency within capitalism - its fundamental need to regulate and control.

Isn't this reference to capitalism likely to play into the hands of your critics, to be seen as dragging old fashioned Left politics into the argument?

We will have to leave aside to another day a fuller encounter with the reality that all youth work is political; that one way or another it finishes up resisting or accommodating to the power relations dominant within society. And indeed whether the categories of Left and Right are that meaningful any more. My initial reference here to capitalism is purely descriptive. Following the banking débâcle of 2008 the Financial Times itself bore a banner headline for quite some weeks, 'Capitalism in Crisis'. Capitalists themselves call this system capitalism. That is what it is. To talk of youth work as if it floats free from the capitalist imperative is wilfully idiotic in the original sense of the word : to be self-centred and disinterested in public affairs.[7] As we shall see all the talk of outcomes is individualistic, deliberately and deceitfully apolitical.

In which case my second reference to capitalism is explicitly political. Whilst capitalism has been capable of astonishing dynamism and innovation, it is fundamentally a system of exploitation and oppression. It has sought to master (sic) rationally both nature and humanity in the service of 'perpetual production and ceaseless consumption'.[8] From the late 19th century onwards close to its heart has been the notion of scientific management or Taylorism, the idea that workers could be persuaded or intimidated into being more productive. To offer a well-known example from the early twentieth century, scientific management, bent on the outcome of greater efficiency, treated workers as no more than cogs in the productive machine. Hence time and motion experts were introduced into the factory to monitor every second of the work-force's activity. Unfortunately for the technocrats the management strategy failed to recognise that the human cogs had minds of their own. It often failed lamentably, particularly in the face of organised labour. Nevertheless this setback has not deterred succeeding generations of management from pursuing 'new' ways, always allegedly rational, sometimes conciliatory, sometimes aggressive, of getting workers to do as they are told, of getting them to deliver the designated outcomes decreed from on high.

Taylorism, what a slur on the family name! Be that as it may, how does this all fit with youth work? What are you getting at?

The world of youth work has never been completely exempt from bureaucratic scrutiny, but until the last couple of decades its marginality saw it often overlooked. For good, bad and indifferent reasons there was a significant measure of worker or professional autonomy. However with the triumph of neo-liberal capitalism in the 1980's, expressed initially in Thatcherism, both public services and the concept of professional autonomy have endured a relentless assault. Outcomes-Based Management [OBM], a product itself of the early 1990's, has proved to be a key element in the strategy of marketising both the public and voluntary sectors and disciplining its workforce. With the arrival of New Labour in 1997 youth work itself became the subject of more attention with the continuous references to outcomes leading to the increasing use of the term 'Positive Activities' rather than youth work to describe our relations with young people.[10] This quest to redefine what we mean by youth work is reaching a new level with the appearance of the YF Framework.

Let me be clear though, hasn't youth work always been a contested space? Your own writings from as long ago as the late 70's stress the conservative character of much youth work practice, despite the dominance of a radical curriculum in the training agencies. In what sense is the present YF emphasis on social conformity qualitatively different?

The opening lines of our book, 'Stories from Practice' speak to this question. "For those involved in doing youth work, whether voluntary or paid, whatever their ideological differences, there has long been a consensus. It ought to be founded on a voluntary engagement with young people in their leisure time. It ought to be informal and educational, focused on the personal, social and political awareness of the young people drawn to its provision." [11] Across this pluralist landscape there has been angst and argument, but room for diversity. This is increasingly not the case today when the outcomes for youth work are prescribed and insisted upon. The rules are hard and fast. If you don't buy into this contemporary currency of outcomes, you have no chance in the lottery of funding.

As a child of this pluralism I recognise this and am struck by the enormity of the shift. Yet, if the language of outcomes has so permeated the public and voluntary sector overall, what choice have youth service managers and workers, but to embrace and make the best of it?

At this point irony rears its contrary head. Just as the NYA/LGA pledge their allegiance to OBM the very approach is being called to account. From within the management milieu itself voices are to be heard, arguing 'the more we try to measure, to define in advance, the less we understand'.

Let me touch on a few of the emerging criticisms, drawing upon an insightful contribution made by Toby Lowe of Helix Arts and a fellow of the Newcastle Business School at a conference in Manchester back in March 2013. [12] In doing so I want to challenge the assumption that those, who insist on the efficacy of outcomes, are the hard-headed pragmatists living in the real world. Rather they are the bearers of a dangerous delusion.

- The meaning of any outcome for a young person can only be understood in relation to the totality of their lives, the complexity of influences upon their existence. If you are going to disentangle this complexity - for example, why has this young person gained or lost confidence across a period of time?- you need to have the wherewithal to do some serious qualitative research. Indeed the gurus of OBM accept that the scrutiny of progression or regression amongst those being worked with demands at least 18 months study, set alongside the monitoring of a parallel control group not being worked upon. To say the least such a venture would be time-consuming, expensive and still haunted by the intricacies of a young person's life. Thus it does not happen. The fig leaf of rigour droops at its first appearance.
- It is all but impossible to attribute outcomes to a single source. An outcome is not delivered by a single programme or organisation. It cannot be its property. No agency has complete control over what constitutes an outcome. By its very social nature an outcome is the product of multiple causality. [13] As youth workers under pressure to deliver, we might care to reflect that the longer we spend getting to know a young person, the less likely we are to attribute any outcome to a single cause, the less likely we are to claim it is our doing.
- We might care to consider too that the pressure to produce outcomes undermines the making of relationships with young people, distorting our priorities and practices. It puts the cart before the horse.
- To add insult to injury the pursuit of outcomes is inevitably simplified. Given that the contradictions cannot be dealt with, it leads to the collection of 'easy to capture' data, inflating the significance of fleeting and superficial responses to questionnaires and inventories.
- Finally the fragile process of getting to know a young person, is reduced to no more than an opportunity to gather and log data, the primary purpose of which is its significance in the

market, in the competition for funding and the need to meet the narrow expectations of commissioners.

Let me get this straight. So critics such as Toby Lowe are emphasising process rather than outcome, but surely they themselves are in favour of what they deem to be a superior form of management?

Your point is well made. At the conference I mentioned above, a range of people from the National Health Service, Housing, Social Services, the Police and the Voluntary Sector were at pains to propose that starting from the client/the patient's view of the situation was a much more successful way of managing their services. This holistic approach is called 'systems management'. There is not the space here to explore this perspective, but, whatever my deep-seated antagonism to the 'right to manage', it deserves our considered attention.[14] For now let me quote from the then Chief Executive of the Newcastle Council of Voluntary Services, Carole Howells, who observed, "the outcomes fashion has driven the sector into a position of having to say it is doing something that can't actually be done, to be claiming outcomes, which aren't necessarily its outcomes." [15]

This is getting a little confusing. Surely youth work has always prided itself on a commitment to process. Surely it doesn't need lessons from the Newcastle Business School?

As it happens I'm sure Toby Lowe's analysis is rooted in his work within Participatory Arts. However I do think the present state of affairs is close to embarrassing. We might have hoped that youth work, a way of being with young people founded on conversation and association freely undertaken, founded, as you say, on process, would have repelled the top-down imposition of outcomes; that it would have resisted the suffocation of its creative, yet unpredictable engagement with young people. Soberingly it is a measure of our collective lack of commitment to the uncertainty of process that the majority of our managers and so many workers have embraced unquestioningly the superficial certitude of outcomes. It is as if we have abandoned our own history. And then forgetting our past there are those only too willing to rewrite it for us. Thus Beitha McNeil, one of the authors of the YF framework, tells us authoritatively that 'historically services for young people have been regarded as self-evidently good'. [16] There is not the slightest acknowledgement that youth work has always been a disputed arena of practice ; that its funding has always been fragile.

Okay it's clear that you are very unhappy with the Young Foundation's framework. Can you start to outline your concerns?

The first thing to say is that the Framework is a profoundly ideological document. It is not at all neutral. It is designed to appease the outlook and demands of neo-liberal capitalism, but refuses to acknowledge this openly and honestly.

Forgive me interrupting, but could you say a little more about the Young Foundation, given you accuse them of lacking neutrality?

I'm not suggesting they ought to be neutral. I'm asking that they acknowledge their politics. As part of the CATALYST consortium the YF's role is identified as 'supporting the strengthening of the youth sector market and in particular the establishment of the social finance retailer. This will include mapping the sector for social finance, and the development of a framework for impact measurement that is accepted by the youth sector overall and builds on existing tools.' [17]

Fair enough that is an explicit brief. They were given their orders.

From the very outset the YF utilises the alibi of austerity, behind which so many hide, to justify its

references to saving the public purse, to justify its refashioning of what constitutes youth work. Evidently austerity has been visited upon us by the Ancient Gods, a state of affairs to be endured without complaint. It is not the conscious consequence of economic and political policies, serving the interests of the 1% rather than the 99%.[18]

The die is cast immediately. The product of the framework is to be the 'emotionally resilient' young individual, who through the planned interventions of youth workers, will shrug their shoulders at adversity. Utterly in tune with government policy this manufactured individual will have less need for public services such as health and social welfare and will be willing to work for whatever wages, zero-hour contracts or indeed benefits are on offer. This is the self-centred, compliant young person of neo-liberalism's dreams. The last thing such an obedient cipher would do is to ask, "how come this is happening to me, my mates, to thousands of others?" Nowhere in the Framework is there an acknowledgement that to talk of personal change demands an engagement with the social and political circumstances underpinning young people's lives.

Your turn of phrase recalls the feminist slogan, 'the personal is political. What quite is its relevance?

Remarkably the Framework's fix on young people takes us back half a century. Throughout its pages young people are viewed as a homogeneous category – young people are young people are young people. The young person is denied his or her class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and faith. Despite all the talk about the individual in the Framework the individual described is that theoretical monstrosity, the general individual, who in reality does not exist. It is as if the gains of the late twentieth century in understanding the social individual never occurred. For example a working-class black young woman does not experience the world in exactly the same way as a white middle-class young woman and so on. And indeed the individual working-class black young woman herself can never be reduced to a general expression of her own social grouping. Comprehending the individual is no simple matter.

Unsurprisingly therefore the issue of power is utterly absent, notwithstanding the ritual abuse of the notion of empowerment. No recognition is given to the significance of structural inequality, to the question of who possesses power and in whose interests they wield that power. Thus the only problems facing young people are to be found inside their heads, psychological shortcomings. It's an old and weary cry. The 1 million young unemployed, those not in employment, education and training, the generation of 'graduates without a future', 'the human expression of a broken economic model' [19] just need to pull up their socks and all will be well. All they require is a dose of 'positive psychology.'

And by all accounts the desire to become young entrepreneurs each and everyone. But seriously aren't we being harsh and cynical here? The Framework maps out a matrix of capabilities backed by research.

So it might appear. Pulling up one's individual socks means improving one's social and emotional capabilities and the YF does claim that its matrix is backed by contemporary robust and rigorous findings.

In fact the matrix itself hardly sets the pulse racing. Its seven clusters of capabilities, even if differently named and grouped, might have been put together by any group of youth workers on a training day. Or if you care to revisit that absorbing read, Baden Powell's, 'Scouting for Boys', subtitled 'A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship', you will find most of these concerns covered within its pages over a century ago. [20]

COMMUNICATION
CONFIDENCE AND AGENCY
PLANNING AND PROBLEM SOLVING
RELATIONSHIPS AND LEADERSHIP
CREATIVITY
RESILIENCE AND DETERMINATION
MANAGING FEELINGS

However the Young Foundation do up the stakes by claiming that their clusters are underpinned by a literature research, which has unearthed a variety of supportive academic references – predominantly from within the world of North American social psychology. As it is the range of these sources is less than extensive and at times the findings verge on the banal. The most excruciating example is provided by the UK's Sheffield University, which informs us that 'good communication skills are essential in life.' What is crucial here is that the supposedly 'scientific' conclusions of the research used within the Framework prepare the way for the introduction of the supposedly 'scientific' accompanying tests, which can be used to monitor both young people's and workers' performance, of which more later.

But, if the matrix of capabilities is unremarkable, why are you in such a state about it all?

Perhaps it's because the YF's attempt to harden the so-called 'soft' centre of our practice, to calculate the incalculable, has been so seductive to the field. It has appealed enormously to a profession in search of an identity acceptable to neo-liberal managerialism. The issues contained in the clusters – creating confidence, exploring motivation, building self-belief, encouraging empathy and so on - are well known to us all. However in seeking to make these 'outcomes' the driving force of practice the YF turn youth work on its head.

To repeat, these concerns, what the YF insists on defining as outcomes, have always been woven into the youth work tapestry, appearing to the fore, fading into the background as appropriate to the unfolding of the story to be found therein. Thus as youth workers we don't unravel such concerns as single threads separate from the whole. To do so would be to damage both relationship and process. Youth work proceeds from its best sense of the whole, dealing with specifics as they become pertinent.

The advocates of outcomes have no interest in a holistic pedagogy. This is made plain in a remarkable sentence. "Capabilities are different to qualities, which encompass values, beliefs and personality." At a stroke and without further explanation they invoke a dualist separation that collapses at the first reference to their own matrix. How is it possible to explore self-belief or having a sense of purpose without debating values, without recognising that engaging with social and emotional capabilities is to be immersed in the making of 'personality' or character, if you prefer?

To take but one example the cluster around self includes the value laden notion of self regulation. In fact no human beings regulates themselves in an asocial vacuum. Like it or not politics exposes its influential face. The self regulated individual envisaged is someone who accepts and fits into the societally prescribed way of being an individual – for which perhaps there will soon be a corporate certificate of approval from Coca-Cola or McDonalds.

That's going a bit far, but why do you think this distinction between capabilities and qualities is being made?

Not sure how far I'm going! It's hardly satirical to suggest that such as Coca-Cola might well be funding research into measuring self-regulated 'Happiness'! The dilemma for the YF is that it needs to convince us that there is an objective dimension to its matrix of capabilities ; that in some way they are scientifically measurable and comparable. To have a chance of pulling this off, subjective notions of values and beliefs need to be held at an arms length. In fact though the clusters reveal themselves to be a muddy mix of capabilities and consciousness. Admitting to this complexity of contradiction can be touched upon in passing, but can never be taken seriously or the whole edifice would collapse.

Thus we are offered a secondary matrix of tools, basically tests and questionnaires, with which to assess the 'objective' progress or otherwise of young people. For example, we are directed to the General Self-Efficacy scale; the Grit survey; the Mental Toughness measure; the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale; the Resilience scale: the New Philanthropy Capital Well-Being measure. Now the usefulness and bias of these sorts of tests is a matter of significant criticism and debate. They do not reveal the truth. At best they produce information to be interpreted in the light of a vortex of variables.

And if you think the concepts being used are somehow weightier and more convincing because they are the basis of a structured test, think again. In the Appendix to the Framework we are treated to a definition of resilience. It reads, "the ability to cope with shocks and rebuffs that may be short-term or consume a long period of a young person's life, for example, continuing to climb a mountain when it starts to rain (see also Determination)." I shall content myself with suggesting that even this grossly simplistic definition of resilience is somewhat speculative. Was the decision to go on fool-hardy? Was the decision to stop wise? And so on..... Such a superficial explanation of resilience hardly bodes well for what they mean by the other capabilities.

Let me stop you there. As you know part of my history is in social research. As a research assistant in a major project looking at the situation facing parents of children with Down's Syndrome I was involved in tortuous debates about the use of this or that interview schedule. In the end our structured interview, at least in my hands, fell apart. The person I was interviewing, usually the mother, did not want simply to be trapped in our 'objective' straitjacket. She wanted to tell her story in her own way. She wanted to be listened to. And I put the questions aside and listened.

In so doing you touched on a deep-seated dilemma for all of us, be we, the social theorist trying to understand the individual and society, the social researcher investigating the individual and society or the youth worker seeking to engage with the young individual within society. None of us can stand outside of this human creation, society. We are immersed in the social relations we are trying to comprehend. In addition these social relations refuse to stand still for the benefit of the theorist, the researcher or the worker. They are forever in flux. As Heraclitus observed long ago, "we never step into the same river twice."

Let's take the assertion that young people need to be 'emotionally resilient'. A pressing sequence of questions is set in motion. What does the notion of 'emotional resilience' mean in the specific social and political circumstances of today? How are we to assess the 'emotional resilience' of the politicians advocating a particular ideological interpretation of the notion? What about the 'emotional resilience' of those designing, for example, the 'grit and determination' questionnaire? What price the 'emotional resilience' of managers and workers implementing the programme? These are not idle concerns. As Castoriadis notes the belief we can somehow cast off our subjectivity, that

the issues being addressed do not apply to us, often masks a desire to be in control., to exercise power over others.[21]

Significantly the most authentic person-centred youth work – from post-Albemarle non-directive, detached work to feminist-inspired practice with girls - grapples directly with these issues. Its starting point is that both youth worker and young person are involved in a critical dialogue grounded in their shared and differing experiences, learning from each other in the process. It should be added too that such a perspective is no easy thing to hang onto. It is no laissez-faire option. Correspondingly there is an urge to develop tool-kits for practice, to codify the approach. I would argue, for instance, that the codification of the radical youth work of the 1970's and 80's into what became known as as Anti-Oppressive and Anti-Discriminatory Practice [AODP] led gradually to a hierarchical and intolerant politics, utterly at odds with its origins. I, myself, was not immune to this malaise. Ironically in terms of our discussion it leant to the introduction of what the Daily Mail would probably still call 'politically correct' outcomes. I suspect this tactical and strategic error, the lapse into demanding that workers toed the line, has contributed to the lack of overall opposition to the sweeping changes of the last thirty years. As was observed at the Wigan seminar some youth service managers became disciples of 'new managerialism', determined to knock their work-force into shape. The tools of targets and outcomes became the bludgeon.

I remember being pulled from pillar to post in the late 1980's as a part-time youth worker, a socialist-feminist activist and being what was more or less a political appointee by a Labour council. There was a pressure to do the business. Never mind winning hearts and minds, the line was just get the 'progressive' policies in place and make sure people go along with them It was all intertwined with the clash between Thatcherism and the municipal-socialist councils of the time. Certainly the Left in power locally was authoritarian. It gave short shrift to any notion of process. Returning to 2013 the more we discuss, the more it becomes apparent to me that, far from being new, a top-down outcomes agenda perpetuates a deficit model of education.

All of which places the present-day youth worker in an invidious position. Asked to deliver outcomes the inclination, indeed the pressure, is to overlook the potential for debate thrown up by the possible differing meanings of a young person's responses to an inventory. The priority is to translate the results into the easily absorbed data, favoured by managers, funders and politicians. The computer's programme beckons. Its thirst for data is insatiable.

What on earth, we might ponder, is the relationship of such artificial and imposed moments, the handing out of a questionnaire in the early days of meeting a young person, to the fluid and negotiated world of youth work? All of these instruments require a schedule of testing founded on a some sort of programmed intervention. Again we are forced to ask, in what way does such a calculated intrusion fit into a youth work relationship, within which the youth worker does not presume to know best?

Obviously such instruments are much easier to use within identified, referred, structured, targeted groups of young people – which of course is very much the increasing situation today. But even here all is not plain sailing. For example I have had close contact with a Schools Inclusion project over a number of years where the task of assessing progress was bedevilled by what is called the Hawthorne effect. The hypothesis being that unless young people are very much at odds with the worker, they tend to furnish the responses and answers they think are expected and desired. Let me acknowledge that this phenomenon applies to unstructured conversations too, but for those claiming rigour its skewing effect is all the more problematic.

This last point does resonate for me. I remember well pleading with groups not to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. Nevertheless the NYA/LGA document continues confidently to proclaim

the need for outcomes and even provides a method of calculation.

I sense the confidence is dented a little. The NYA/LGA allow reluctantly that other forms of providing evidence will co-exist with the data afforded by the outcomes approach. This said they remain adamant that meeting outcomes constitutes the future. Their Calculator makes no bones about it. The outcomes data will demonstrate where youth work creates savings for the public purse.

In this scenario open access youth work is perceived as an anachronism. In a few superficial sentences a sophisticated and pluralist tradition is ruled out as a medium for producing the necessary data because:

- young people come and go according to their own agendas!
- young people self-select!
- young people are not amenable to in depth discussions at an individual or group level because there are too many of them! All those Friday night discos of yesteryear , I presume!

This dishonest dismissal is perhaps inevitable. At the centre of the outcomes strategy since New Labour's arrival in power in 1997 has been the project to redefine youth work. In recent years a favoured ploy has been to use notions of youth work, youth service, youth services and work with young people interchangeably. Thus, whilst the NYA/LGA document talks of youth work, the work with young people it favours is targeted, structured and formalised. Even the traditional sounding Solihull Youth Service has developed a system of base-line assessments to be held in individual files, which are introduced at the start of work with young people. Assessments as soon as a worker meets a young person! And individual files! Let me conjecture that many of the young people, with whom I have worked, would have had little truck with such surveillance. Part of the trust, sometimes painfully built, rested on a shared hope that I would prove not to be another authority figure.

Aren't you perhaps admitting then that youth work has changed fundamentally, that once more you are to be found swimming upstream?

Given I can hardly swim, this is a mite depressing. Certainly the NYA/LGA document, whilst pretending otherwise, opportunistically talking of 'co-production' at one point, remains intent on what is to all intents and purposes a programme of behavioural modification as approved by the politicians. Everything and nothing is decided in advance with an ever alert eye on the cash flow.

Prior to any encounter with a young person a whole array of decisions and considerations need to be met – the audience must be defined; the evidence needed decided upon; the evidence must be analysis-friendly; data managers and commissioners must be involved from the outset; a balanced portfolio of outcomes should be selected and so on... Thus irrespective of where a young person might be up to, the agency chooses a mixed bag of outcomes drawn from the clusters as its targets for work with young people over some agreed period.. Indeed the NYA/LGA tell us explicitly that defining the outcomes you desire for young people will strengthen your ability to gather the data you want. Of course all this is beset by methodological dilemmas, some of which are all but insurmountable. At this point the NYA/LGA abandon rigour in favour of sloppiness. Suddenly we are told that explanations re the methodology should be reasonable and not too complex. Indeed that folk should 'just do their best'. I quite warm to this common-sense turn, but it's hardly robust. And it does not deter the NYA/LGA from further supplication at the feet of the God, Data. We are assured that “collecting the right data will help separate your project from the crowd and illustrate your leading role.” Indeed, they stress, it will be the key to competing in a future of payment-by-results.

Perhaps I should know better, but I'm shocked at the equation of good youth work with collecting the right data. I need to take a deep breath. It's difficult not to feel overwhelmed by their domination of the agenda. Do you see any hope of turning things round?

Certainly we face a insistent self-perpetuating circle of collective delusion. We are asked to believe that the outcomes approach offers objectivity, is robust, produces useful data etc. etc. This is spewed out ad nauseam. Our problem is that the illusion dressed in pseudo-scientific garb gains the appearance of reality if so many involved from workers to managers to politicians, not to mention researchers, buy into the fantasy. However their problem is that lived, messy reality throws up all manner of problems for the outcomes approach, which have to be glossed over. Let me touch on a few, not yet covered in our critique so far.

- The underlying implication is that the capabilities once attained become straightforwardly an integral part of the young person's character. She becomes confident, resilient, articulate and motivated as confirmed by her responses during assessment. The trouble is that none of the capacities are so easily measured. Let's take confidence for simplicity's sake. Outside of the YF's positivist laboratory, confidence ebbs and flows, waxes and wanes. It is so often situation-specific. I can stand up and give a speech to a packed hall, but can't possibly complain about the terrible meal in the restaurant. It is context-specific in the sense that one's level of confidence is related intimately to the ups and downs of daily existence. Failing to even get an interview after numerous applications undermines its presence. Crucially the shifting, fragile and provisional nature of many of the capabilities can be best understood only if we have a feel, at the very least, for a young person's biography. This process of worker and young person getting to know each other cannot be presumptuously packaged. It is organic in its authenticity, fully aware of its limitations. It cannot be force-fed artificially without distorting the relationship.
- To stay with the importance of the young person's daily diary many of the capabilities need to be practised if they are to be retained, even nurtured. Let's take the matter of communication skills. A young person might be seen to be becoming more fluent and articulate across a residential weekend. If though they return to working long hours at Tesco's where voicing an opinion is frowned upon, if they are still living at home in an oppressive atmosphere without the money to escape, the ability to express themselves is in danger of atrophy. The flowering of capabilities is related intimately to the constraints placed on a young person by their social circumstances. Even so nothing is certain. The young person may defy the odds. All I am stressing is that the improvement of capabilities is riddled with uncertainty. This doubt has to be faced frontally. It cannot be wished away by recourse to metrics.
- Leave aside a token reference to working in a team the matrix conveys no understanding of the way in which individual capabilities are developed through young people's own collective activity. As far as silences within the matrix go, there is no reference to the idea that young people might be critically conscious and questioning of the society within which they live. Absent is any idea that young people should be supported in fostering their own autonomous support groups - their own peer group [or gang?] or a young women's group, a black young people's group or a LGBT group. We can go further. Lurking inside the discourse is an aversion to any such groups founded on a shared sense of exploitation and oppression. The model group favoured is socially mixed. Here we hark back very much to a Victorian ethos, the hope that young people of a lower class would be civilised by the contact with their betters. The present day National Citizen Service is premised on the mixing of backgrounds, the notion that 'we're all in this together', but as individuals. The social outcome desired is the undermining of oppositional collective solidarity on the basis

of class, gender, race, disability and sexuality.

- And in daring to touch on young people's sexuality we can but note the frankly absurd failure within the matrix to address sex as a compelling feature of 'growing up'. Obviously though a questionnaire on sexual orientation might prove disconcerting. How is progress to be measured – away from or towards differing and shifting sexualities?

I don't think you have answered my question. I might well agree with your analysis, but so what? What are the chances of disturbing the status quo?

I am trying to get there, but permit a couple of final observations before I conclude.

- To prescribe outcomes is to stifle the improvised and creative character of practice, which can produce 'unforeseen' outcomes, initially never imagined by any of the participants. Dictating outcomes bans intuition and thinking otherwise. For instance it condemns the worker, who makes the judgement to leave well alone the alienated individual or group until the moment seems ripe. Inevitably such a worker cannot deliver the data as demanded.
- Let me return to the outcome of confidence, just as an example, to add another couple of levels of difficulty to the amassing of data. How do we measure the spilling over of confidence into arrogance, into an excess of hubris? How are we to understand and rate humility? Or is humility, according to the Framework, a quality and not a capability? Isn't it the case that the capabilities cannot be understood outside of the matrix of social relations, the interaction of class, race, gender, sexuality and disability? Isn't a high level of confidence problematic if informed by a supposed sense of superiority on the part of, say, a young, white, upper-middle class, heterosexual male?
- The world of of desired outcomes and desired data cannot bear failure. For a worker to admit that a residential went pear-shaped would be professional suicide. It would be defined as incompetence rather than a sober opportunity to explore with young people what went awry. This fear of getting things wrong reveals itself in an excess of self-congratulatory feedback about events and happenings. Everything seems to be so inspiring, to go so swimmingly well.
- Increasingly it is clear that the collecting of the data is proving to be a means of monitoring a worker's performance, seductive in its simplicity for the manager. As the worker feeds into the computer the score from an initial base-line assessment, the inevitable pressure is for later scores to illustrate improvement. If this is not the case the worker is seen as falling below standard.

I'm sure some people will be deeply offended by the implication that results, the need to compete is undermining the integrity of practice.

Without doubt it is happening. To return to the overall argument made by Toby Lowe his research into OBM reveals that wherever it is being used – in the Health Service, in Social Services, in Housing - 'gaming' occurs. To put it bluntly the need to meet targets and outcomes leads managers and workers into manipulating and fabricating the data. As Toby is at pains to say this is not about maverick individuals, bad apples. 'Gaming', falsifying the figures, is a systemic dilemma. It is the consequence of a flawed approach to evaluating the purpose and quality of practice. As things stand youth work has invested its very soul into the Outcomes project. Whilst workers will talk off the record about malpractice the cost of blowing the whistle would be enormous. It would be perceived as an act of treason.

You describe a stifling, even intimidatory atmosphere. Aren't you in danger of exaggerating, of creating a sense of hopelessness? Doesn't this weaken the possibility of turning the tide?

My sweeping generalisation should be challenged if it is wide off the mark. However it is informed by hundreds of conversations across the last five years and longer, which confirm the suppression of questioning voices inside of agencies and services. In my opinion the Campaign has created hope rather than hopelessness. Workers feel less isolated because of our existence.

Continuing in this vein, in my opinion, our struggle against the quasi-scientific and individualist discourse of outcomes is a particular expression of a wider struggle against an increasingly authoritarian form of capitalism, which threatens our very existence. We are amongst the inheritors of a critical tradition of democratic education that reaches as far back at the very least to Socrates. Over ensuing centuries this tradition has often been all but extinguished. However in the 19th and 20th centuries this educational praxis, within which, it's worth repeating, the educator herself is as much educated as her student, revived. It renewed itself through radical religious groups, together with the workers' and social movements. Within this renaissance, I think, a special place should be given to the libertarian and anarchist current. Indeed following the Second World War it influenced to a degree State education through such remarkable characters as Alex Bloom, head of a secondary modern school in Stepney in London's East End from 1945 -55. [22] In this context youth work has proved to be a place where such a democratic *paideia* could prosper, even if the ideas were never fully accepted.

Thus in both defending our corner and in being part of something much bigger I believe it is best first and foremost to think of ourselves as democratic educators rather than youth workers. We are democratic educators or as our European fellow-travellers would say, critical pedagogues, who happen to be youth workers. People who share our principles do so in all manner of places, within schooling, welfare, in the trade unions, in cooperatives and so on – usually under greater constraints than we have experienced. That is until now.

I was beginning to worry that you were wandering away from our discussion, but I have to confess that I find your notion of 'democratic educators' helpful. Over the years as someone, who was a part-time youth worker in the beginning, but then was a research student, a city council unemployment coordinator, a local government communications officer and a lecturer I used to get really frustrated when youth workers used to go on about their youth work values. It was as if I was not privy to this special body of principles and skills. I remember cracking up once and shouting, 'you've not brought any values to this room that weren't here in the first place, courtesy the rest of us'. Anyway I'm now digressing!

I don't think it's a digression, which I hope will become clear as I try to sum up 'where we are up to' and 'what we are doing.' Undoubtedly we remain committed to playing a part in the renewing of an alternative to the functional emphasis of much that passes for youth work today.

- From our very first conference in Manchester we have pursued 'story-telling' as a means of uncovering the ups and downs of an authentic practice. With the support of UNISON and UNITE we published 'Stories of Practice', which seems to have had a significant impact, inspiring a whole range of workshops across the UK. As we speak we are in the throes of considering a second book, which pursues in more detail narrative as a contribution to evaluating practice and to the content of training. In this next phase we are concerned to involve workers operating in targeted settings and to involve more young people themselves. This need was brought out sharply in the Outcomes seminars we held in Bolton and Wigan this summer.

- For myself this aspiration to reach out across the plurality of today's 'work with young people' settings is informed by the following question. "Given the differing and sometimes almost overwhelming constraints, are the workers involved still trying to be democratic educators?" Let me be clear and I know folk disagree with me, I don't believe it is helpful to attach the name of youth work to what is plainly youth social work or youth justice or leisure activities, often now organised under the banner of early intervention. I believe youth work should be retained to define the distinctive practice captured by the cornerstones in our founding letter. However this does not mean we don't relate to and support youth workers in all manner of other situations, alongside the teachers, the social workers, the housing workers et al, who are pledged to a critical dialogue, with those with whom they work.
- Amidst the tension and strain in the work-place I would suggest tentatively that there's often more space to question than we allow. It becomes easy to censor ourselves before the official censor even appears. I do not believe it is beyond our wit and imagination to put before the politicians and managers the data they yearn for, tempered by our misgivings and criticism. I do believe it is possible to say, 'here are the figures for this particular project in percentiles. The data is easy on the eye and ear, but in truth it tells us less than we used to garner from the project reports, our meetings with workers and young people in the past.' Probably we have no option, but to provide the data as requested. However we have an obligation to be honest about its weaknesses. I know there are workers and managers, who continue to walk this tightrope. It would be good to hear from others
- In grappling with these concerns we are certainly not alone. At home in the UK we cooperate with the National Coalition for Independent Action, the Social Work Action Network, the Federation for Detached Youth Work, the Choose Youth alliance and many other smaller groups in a critical exchange of ideas and activity. Our concerns are shared in the European community of youth workers, where in Filip Cousse's succinct phrase, the objective of much government policy is 'to formalise the informal'.^[23] We are involved in the evolution of an embryo European Association for Open Youth Work.
- A very recent and stimulating piece by Dana Fusco from New York, who spoke at a July IDYW seminar in London, explores the clash between the hierarchy's desire for certainty and the shifting dynamic of practice across the professions.^[24] She notes that social workers are calling for a 'stance of creative ambiguity', which is comfortable with nuance and uncertainty. Speaking of being a teacher she quotes Van Manen, whose description highlights the commonality of those I wish to describe as 'democratic educators'. Such practitioners need "moral intuitiveness, self-critical openness, thoughtful maturity, a tactful sensitivity towards the child's subjectivity, an interpretive intelligence, a pedagogical understanding of the child's needs, improvisational resoluteness in dealing with young people, a passion for knowing and learning the mysteries of the world, the moral fibre to stand up for something, a certain understanding of the world, active hope in the face of prevailing crises and, not the least, humour and vitality."

There are a few things I'd like to explore there, but it is an uplifting, if daunting portrayal of what we should aspire to. A last word on outcomes?

I won't prolong the agony except to say that the outcomes-led attempt to dissect and categorise our engagement with young people poses an enormous problem. We cannot deliver on its terms. Of course we can continue to deceive ourselves and others. In reality youth work impacts on young people's lives in a profusion of ways, to greater and lesser degrees. We can provide a range of evidence related to this potential impact. We cannot provide proof. Our task is to argue afresh that

many conclusions and decisions in the making of a democratic society will be provisional, the best we can make at any given time. In a crucial sense that makes them all the more important as nothing is ever decided for good.

Speaking of good in a different way I am conscious of coming across as describing a Manichean battle between Good and Evil, between those of us committed to democratic education and those committed to social engineering. In practice there will be many in the Outcomes camp, who believe genuinely that they are ensuring the survival of youth work by turning it into a commodity, which people want to purchase. In doing so they believe they are retaining its values and skills. What seems to be woefully absent is a willingness to enter into critical dialogue about whether this claim stands up to scrutiny.

As Malcolm Ball put it at an IDYW seminar in October 2012, “ the youth work process I pursue hopes to enable young people to become the people they wish to be in circumstances not of their own choosing. It is not about a process of ideological modification guaranteeing outcomes congruent with the present society.”

The ideological clash, which cannot be avoided, is between an open or closed view of the future, between a belief that another world is possible and a conclusion that history has run its course. The Outcomes agenda makes a pact with the latter, accepting the thesis that this is as good as it gets. It is the servant of a politics without vision or imagination, a politics without hope. For those of us, who continue to believe that humanity is capable of a much better shot at creating a just and equal society the means must reflect our hopes and dreams. Hence we cherish a prefigurative youth work practice founded on dialogue, doubt and democracy, even if we have often fallen short of this ambition.[25]

As we stated in our Open Letter the neo-liberal ideology informing the Outcomes project “wishes to confine to the scrapbook of history the idea that Youth Work is volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees.” We need to continue to think, improvise and organise against this threat and its illusions.

Thanks are due to the participants at the Bolton and Wigan IDYW Seminars for their responses to Tony's thoughts, which have influenced the content of the above interview and to Susan Atkins, Malcolm Ball, Andy Benson, Paula Connaughton, Tania de St Croix, Bernard Davies and Dana Fusco for additional comments.

FOOTNOTES

1. NYA/LGA *The Future for Outcomes* [2013] at http://nya.org.uk/dynamic_files/finalcommissioning/Future%20for%20Outcomes%20Guide.pdf ; NYA/LGA *The Future for Outcomes : The Calculator in Practice* [2013] at http://nya.org.uk/dynamic_files/finalcommissioning/Future%20for%20Outcomes%20Calculator.pdf ;The Young Foundation *'Framework of Outcomes for Young People'* [2012] - all materials to be found at <http://youngfoundation.org/publications/framework-of-outcomes-for-young-people/>
2. Under the auspices of the DeMontfort University Bernard Davies and Brian Merton produced two revealing and, it feels, wilfully ignored 'modest inquiries' into the state of youth work practice in a changing policy environment : *'Squaring the Circle'* [2009] at <http://www.dmu.ac.uk/documents/health-and-life-sciences-documents/research/squaringthecircle.pdf> and *'Straws in the Wind'* [2010] at

<http://www.dmu.ac.uk/documents/health-and-life-sciences-documents/research/strawsinthewind-executivesummary.pdf>

3. For a broad introduction to the continued relevance of Gramsci, the Italian Marxist see Burke, B. (1999, 2005) 'Antonio Gramsci, schooling and education', *the encyclopedia of informal education*, <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-gram.htm>.
4. The founding Open Letter of the IDYW Campaign can be found at http://www.indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk/wordpress/?page_id=90
5. For a classic summary of their perspective see Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith [2008] 'Valuing youth work' in *Youth & Policy*, 100.
6. The blog by Fiona Blacke, the Chief Executive of the NYA, 'New Times Need New Thinking' [March 2012] is no longer to be found on its site, whilst Paulo Freire's [1970] '*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*' Penguin: London is still available, arguing that "Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world."
7. Idiot is a word derived from the Greek ἰδιώτης, *idiōtēs*, roughly translated as a private citizen. Within Athenian democracy an idiot was self-centred and disinterested in politics, the affairs of the public realm – clearly a person in need of social and political education!
8. Cornelius Castoriadis, amongst others, stresses the irrational character of 'perpetual production and ceaseless consumption'. For an introduction to his wide-ranging and provocative work see my article, Tony Taylor [2010] 'What has Cornelius Castoriadis to say about youth work?' in *Youth & Policy*, 105 at http://www.youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/youthandpolicy_105.pdf
9. For further explorations of Taylorism see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientific_management and <http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Taylorism>
10. For a thorough account of this period see Bernard Davies [2008] *The New Labour Years : A History of the Youth Service in England, Volume 3 1997 – 2007* NYA : Leicester.
11. In Defence of Youth Work [2011] '*This is Youth Work : Stories from Practice*' IDYW/UNISON : London.
12. At the 'Kittens are Evil : heresies in public policy' conference on March 6, 2013 in Manchester, Toby Lowe spoke to his distributed paper, '*The paradox of outcomes : the more we measure, the less we understand*'. This has now been published in *Public Money & Management*, Volume 33, Issue 3, 2013 at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09540962.2013.785707#.UjXvjn9mN48>
13. For a deeper exploration of the contradictions of causality in youth work, look out for Jon Ord's, '*Aristotle, Phronesis and Youth Work – Measuring the Process : a contradiction in terms*', forthcoming in *Youth & Policy*.
14. Vanguard is a management consultancy, which is organising a series of 'Kittens are Evil'

conferences advocating a shift from a Command and Control to a Systems Thinking approach. Clearly the thrust of my argument is likely to be sceptical of claims to improve services, efficiency and morale, whilst reducing costs. Make your own mind up via <https://www.vanguard-method.com/>

15. Carole Howells [2008] '*Infrastructure Bodies and Outcomes Policy*', paper circulated at the March 2013 'Kittens are Evil' conference.
16. Bethia McNeil [2012] 'When is self-evidently good not good enough?' at <http://youngfoundation.org/young-people-learning-work/when-is-self-evidently-good-not-good-enough/>
17. See Catalyst Partners Work at <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/catalystrolesandresponsibilities.html> where we learn also that the National Council for Voluntary Youth Service will '*establish a social finance retailer that can pilot and then promote a youth sector specific social investment approach based on evidence of impact. It will be our job to co-ordinate the management of the retailer, ensure adequate finance is raised for the fund, identify organisations to participate in the pilot as well as the establishment of a brokerage service which will identify and broker investments that can be supported by a blend of social and commercial investors.*'
18. The slogan, 'We are the 99%' grew out of the OCCUPY movement as it flourished in the later months of 2011. It refers to the concentration of wealth in the hands of the top 1% of income earners. To say the least as political analysis it has its weaknesses. However it has entered common parlance as a pithy way of pointing up the gross inequalities in contemporary society.
19. Paul Mason coined the term 'graduate without a future' in a blog from February 2011. '*Twenty reasons why it's kicking off everywhere*' at http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/newsnight/paulmason/2011/02/twenty_reasons_why_its_kickin_g.html It spawned a book of the same title and further pieces such as '*The graduates of 2012 will survive only in the cracks of our economy*' at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/jul/01/graduates-2012-survive-in-cracks-economy>, which is headlined : '*Uniquely, this cohort can expect to grow up poorer than their parents – the human expression of a broken economic model.*'
20. Robert Baden-Powell [2005] '*Scouting for Boys : A Handbook for Instruction in Good Citizenship*'- edited by Elleke Boehmer OUP : London. This is the original 1908 version with a fascinating new introduction.
21. Again I am referring the reader to my piece on Castoriadis [see footnote 8] as it is one of the few introductions to his writings , which relates to youth work itself. The bibliography of my inadequate article contains some excellent links, including one to a key web site moderated by his indefatigable translator, David Ames-Curtis at <http://www.agorainternational.org/>
22. See Michael Fielding's eye-opening '*Alex Bloom: Introduction and Part 1 Freedom From*' - extracts from a draft chapter for a forthcoming book, Education, Childhood and Anarchism: Talking Colin Ward, edited by Catherine Burke and Ken Jones, to be published by Routledge on October 31st 2013 at <http://www.libed.org.uk/index.php/articles/439-alex-bloom-introduction-and-part-1>

23. Filip Cousse [2012] 'Historical and intercultural consciousness in youth work and youth policy - a double odyssey' in Cousse F. et al [eds] *The history of youth work in Europe, Volume 3* Strasbourg: CEP.
24. Dana Fusco [2013] 'Is Youth Work Being Courted by the Appropriate Suitor?', *Child and Youth Services*, Volume 34, Issue 2.
25. Bernard Davies [2006] 'The Place of Doubt in Youth Work – a Personal Journey', *Youth & Policy* 92 at <http://www.youthandpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/youthandpolicy92.pdf>