Can ethnography complement evaluation within New Public Management? – case studies from England and Denmark

Carol Devanney and Anja Uglebjerg, School of Applied Social Sciences, Durham University.

Introduction

Young people not engaged in education, employment or training are the focus of government policies in many countries. This paper discusses examples of interventions aimed at getting young people to enter education or employment in both England and Denmark and the authors' experiences of evaluating these interventions. While there are obvious differences in the political, cultural and socio-economic context of the two countries there is a commonality in the singular way in which the Government's defined and wanted to understand the success of the interventions. This was based on the numbers of young people who entered education or employment and clearly located within New Public Management discourse. Both evaluations recognised that this was too simplistic a notion of success and there was significantly more to consider when assessing the effectiveness of the interventions. These other aspects will be explored along with the suggestion that it is important to develop understandings of such interventions within both the young people's immediate social context and the political and socio-economic context in which interventions are located.

This paper is not a direct attempt to compare evaluations of youth programmes in England and Denmark but in discussions between the authors it was clear that even within these different contexts our experiences were in many ways similar and we draw on these to discuss if it possible to undertake ethnographic research within this context. In a time when youth unemployment is rising, faster than the total unemployment figures, due to the recession, it is important to put extra focus on young people and actually understand what is working and what is not in youth interventions. It is the view of the authors, based on their own experiences of evaluating youth programmes, that a focus on goal-based evaluation will actually not provide politicians and programme funders with a full picture of what is going on

in the programmes. The authors argue that politicians and funders need to gain a broader view of evaluation in order to learn from programmes and fully understand the progress made by young people.

New Public Management

The term New Public Management (NPM) is often used to describe the managerial reforms of public sectors that took off in New Zealand and the UK in the 1980s and in other countries, including Denmark, later (Greve, 2002, Foss Hansen 2005a). Prior to this the dominant organisational forms in public sectors were, broadly speaking, professional bureaucracy and hierarchical administration of policies. New Public Management is often described as a global phenomenon but with national variations (Kettl, 2000: 1). While the term originated in Anglo-Saxon countries, it is widely used to describe a certain type of public sector modernisation, also seen in Nordic countries (Greve, 2002: 1). The global features of New Public Management are described by Kettl (2005: 2-3) as:

- Productivity – creating more public services for less tax money
- Marketisation – for instance privatisation of public services
- Service orientation – making public services more responsive to citizens/services users
- Decentralisation – for instance devolving power from central to lower level government
- Policy – improve capacity to devise and track policy
- Accountability for results – introducing result-driven systems and a focus on output and outcomes instead of processes and structures.

A so-called radical approach is identified in countries such as the UK and New Zealand where NPM reforms were introduced and implemented over a short period of time (Greve, 2002) with the aim of redrawing the boundaries of the state ‘and remodelling the remaining public sector on private business approaches to organisation and management’ (Horton and Farnham, 1999: 3). Nordic Countries and the USA, on the other hand, have had a more incremental approach to reforming their public sectors (Greve, 2002). The authors acknowledge that comparative research points to huge differences between England and

Denmark. The countries for example have very different welfare state models (Esping Andersen, 1990) and it has recently been identified that low levels of economic inequalities, in for example Scandinavian countries, lead to better social outcomes than in countries like the UK with higher levels of economic inequalities (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009), but it is not within the remit of this paper to analyse such differences further.

It is argued that NPM and the commitment to performance management has revolutionised the way in which public services are run including the curtailment of professional autonomy (Blackman and Palmer, 1999). The emphasis on this as a management tool (Bouckaert and van Dooren, 2003) has created a culture of measurement in the public sector (Jacobs and Manzi, 2000) with a focus on accountability for results (Hood, 1995; Gendron, Cooper and Townley, 2000). The focus on public accountability through result-based systems, which understand effectiveness by measuring outputs, has particular implications for public sector employees (Dunleavy and Hood, 1994; Winstanley, Sorabji and Dawson, 1995) including, as we shall discuss later, the evaluation of their work to see if it is resulting in the intended outcomes and outputs. While direct control of professionals was not seen as appropriate in the traditional bureaucratic organisation (Broadbent and Laughlin, 2002) from the perspective of NPM, public sector employees were seen as having too 'much power and act[ing] in their own interest rather than that of their clients' (Lawton, 1998: 83) and therefore there is a need for controlling their work (Lawton, 1998). Despite decentralisation being stated as a key feature of NPM, it has been identified that the imposition of targets and performance measurement systems actually strengthens a 'top-down' approach led by central Government (Barrett, 2004).

While performance management in the public sector is seen as valuable from a political perspective, some writers, such as Winstanley and Stuart-Smith (1996), state that heavy emphasis on this is a paradox in the sense that 'there is no conclusive evidence that the use of performance management systems results in improved performance' (Winstanley and Stuart-Smith, 1996: 67) and that 'performance management can produce undesirable side effects including demoralization and de-motivation' (ibid). Further, this kind of performance culture can be seen as a low-trust strategy towards employees, which is argued to work against high

performance (Legge, 2005), as it is a form of control 'inappropriately used to "police" performance' (Winstanley and Stuart-Smith, 1996: 66). So while targets and performance management are key elements in the NPM agenda, it is also seen here that there are clear criticisms of this as a way of controlling both public sector employees and public spending.

New Public Management is criticised for its focus on economic norms, performance and output control created by the tension of combining economic organisational theory and management theory. It is argued that this approach is too simplistic for the public sector (Christensen and Laegrid, 2002). There has been specific criticisms of its application to the education and training sector where the rise in demand for measured evidence of performance, and the dominance of inspections, target setting and performance monitoring (Gerwitz, 1999), has been described as an 'audit approach to education' (Colley and Hodkinson, 2001: 347). Such a system is problematic for education because it does not adequately represent its comprehensive values and purposes. Ranson notes that this approach:

> '…has embodied flawed criteria of evaluation and relations of accountability. The dominant mode of answerability cannot deliver achievement because it defines a mistaken criteria for evaluating performance, emphasizing the external imposition of targets and quantifiable outcomes as means of improvement' (Ranson, 2003: 470).

The national strategies for young people and education in the two countries will now be set out before the discussion of the evaluations which took place within these contexts.

The English context: Young people and education, employment and training

Young people in England currently leave compulsory education at the age of 16 and may continue into post-compulsory education, move into work-based learning, apprenticeships or enter employment. Via the Education and Skills Act (2008) the Government has legislated to make education or training compulsory until the age of 17 from 2013, and 18 from 2015 (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2007). This is part of wide scale reforms to the education system for 14-19 year-olds in England (DfES, 2002; 2005).

The UK has lower participation rates for 17 year-olds in education or training than many other countries (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2006). At the end of 2008, 79.7% of 16-18 year-olds were reported as participating in education or training. The agenda to increase post-16 participation focuses upon the extended transition into further education or training and the development of a highly skilled workforce with the long-term aim of as many young people as possible achieving National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ) at level 2 (DfES, 2005). The long-term decline in the number of unskilled and semi-skilled jobs means that young people who fail to acquire skills relevant to the 'knowledge economy' (DfES, 2002: 5) face ever-reducing prospects for employment. This post-industrial society of advanced market economies and the shift in labour demands has particular implications for the opportunities for school leavers with few qualifications (Craig and Reiter, 2005).

The agenda to increase participation 'has led to a focus on young people not in education, employment or training' (Simmons, 2009: 138). Young people not in education, employment or training, termed NEETs, have featured significantly in New Labour's drive to tackle social exclusion, disaffection and disengagement (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999). In 1999, it was estimated that 9% of the 16-19 age group were outside of education, employment or training for long periods after leaving compulsory education (SEU, 1999). In an attempt to tackle this, the post-16 learning framework set out a number of reforms including the 'Learning Gateway' initiative and the Connexions service. The Learning and Skills Council (LSC) was established in 2001 with responsibility for funding and planning education and training for over-16s in England with local LSCs (LLSCs), replacing Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), working at regional and sub-regional levels. LSC targets include achievement targets for the number of 19 year-olds qualified to at least NVQ level 2 and 3 and participation targets for the number of 16-18 year-olds participating in structured learning (GHK, 2004). The aim of the post-16 learning framework was to support young people in a holistic way by developing employability as well as active citizenship and personal development (Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), 1999). Subsequently emphasis was placed upon the need for coherent provision responsive to individual needs (DfES, 2002). This was followed by the introduction of Entry to Employment (E2E) as the national training

initiative for young people who did not have NVQ Level 1 or were outside of mainstream education or training.

This agenda remains a high priority and challenge for Government and reducing the proportion of NEETs is a national priority of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) with the target to reduce the proportion of young people who are not in education, employment or training by 2 percentage points by 2010 (from the baseline of 9.6% at the end of 2004 and with a final assessment in June 2012) (Public Service Agreement 14) (DfES, 2007; DCSF, 2007; Her Majesty's Treasury, 2007). This has included the introduction of extra measures for tracking young people and financial incentives to remain in education (DfES, 2007; DCSF, 2007). Investment for a new programme to re-engage young people in post-16 learning was announced at the end of 2007. This includes a Foundation Learning Tier, for 14-19 year-olds, which is aimed at those without entry level or level 1 qualifications (to be fully implemented by 2010) (DfES, 2007). At the end of 2008, there was an overall increase in the NEET rate to 10.3% (DCSF, 2009b). Local authorities, through Children's Trusts, have been given the lead responsibility to reduce the number of NEETs (DCSF, 2008) and are also responsible for ensuring that all 16 and 17 year-olds receive the offer of a place in education or training by the end of September, known as the 'September Guarantee' (DCSF, 2009c). As part of the 14-19 education strategy, many of the responsibilities for funding and commissioning education and training for 16-18 year-olds will be transferred from the LSC to local authorities (DCSF and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2008) from April 2010.

The Danish context – targets for young people in education

In Denmark education is considered the main focus for young people; employment is only considered relevant after completion of a general or vocational upper secondary educational programme – usually called youth education programmes. The main reason for this focus is a decline in numbers of unskilled jobs in Denmark. Young people need skills to gain entry to the labour market and uneducated youth run a higher risk of unemployment than educated

youth (Jensen, 2007), 40% of 25-30 year olds without upper secondary education are unemployed (ibid).
Young people generally enter the general and vocational upper secondary programmes after they finish their compulsory education (9 years in primary and lower secondary school and a voluntary year 10), at around 15-17 years of age. While all young people are encouraged to, and most do, join upper secondary education, it is not compulsory. The aim of the three-year general upper secondary programmes is to prepare young people for higher education (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008a). The vocational programmes primarily provide young people with qualifications to enter employment. There are approximately 125 vocational programmes within areas such building and construction, health, care and pedagogy, media production and business (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008b). Each programme consists of a mixture of school-based and practical training and lasts about four years (Danish Ministry of Education, 2008b). The main target is that at least 85% of all young people should achieve an upper secondary education by 2010 and 95% by 2015 (The Danish Government, 2006). While this has been an unofficial target for a number of years, Copenhagen City Council made it an official target for their work with local youth in 2003; the current Government made it an official national target in 2005 (Danish Government, 2006). It can be argued that the target is realistic considering almost all young people entered one of the programmes after ending compulsory education and approximately 80% completed an upper secondary education in 2003 (Udvalget om at alle unge gennemfoerer en ungdomsuddannelse, 2006). However, there seems to be some serious and difficult issues to address behind the fact that not all young people complete one of the programmes.

The drop out rates from programmes are relatively high with approximately one in six young people dropping out and not completing a course, which is roughly speaking 10,000 young people a year (the population of Denmark is approximately 5.5 million people) and the drop out rates are especially high for the vocational education programmes (Jensen, 2007). In her substantial qualitative study among 49 young Danish people without any upper secondary degree Ulla Hoejmark Jensen found that the majority of the interviewees had the following in common:

- Parents with no education or only short trade-specific training

- Upbringing stricken by problems
- Mixed experience of attending primary school (Jensen, 2007).

It is important to add that young people who are themselves immigrant and descendants of immigrants are less likely to embark upon or complete an upper secondary education than young people with a Danish background and further to this, men have a lower educational completion rate than women (Udvalget om at alle unge gennemfoerer en ungdomsuddannelse, 2006).

Considering the obvious complexity of the problem it is interesting to look at some of the Government's key initiatives and stakeholders in obtaining the 95% target. A coherent education system and professional (youth) guidance are considered important in the work to obtain the 95% target and a great deal of the responsibility is placed on Local Authorities (LAs). They are given the responsibility of making sure that young people start and complete a general and vocational upper secondary education (The Danish Government, 2006). Each LA is responsible for developing their own action plan (The Danish Government, 2006) and reaching the 95% target. True to the performance management paradigm within NPM this is followed by a reward scheme where well performing municipalities are rewarded (a nice carrot in a time of constrained public budgets). While Local Authorities in Denmark are responsible for the primary and lower secondary schools and youth guidance in their particular areas, upper secondary schools falls under the responsibility of national Government and in that sense it is the LAs task to make sure that all children and young people are equipped to make a relevant educational choice and have the skills and motivation to complete an education.

In general the Government sees the 45 Youth Guidance Centres as crucial in reaching the 95% target (Udvalget om at alle unge gennemfoere en ungdomsuddanelse, 2006). In accordance with the ideas underlying the Danish legislation on guidance, guidance is regarded as a continuous process that should help young people become more conscious of their abilities, interests and possibilities, thus enabling them to make decisions regarding education and employment on a qualified basis. The youth guidance centres are responsible for guiding young people in the

transition from compulsory to upper secondary education (Danish Ministry of Education: The Danish Guidance System in Brief). Individual Local Authorities must define how youth guidance work is carried out and make sure that: ‘Objectives, methods, planned activities as well as the performance (results, outcome) of each youth guidance centre are to be published on the Internet’ (Danish Ministry of Education: The Danish Guidance System in Brief).

Evaluation within New Public Management: measured evidence of performance

The widespread use of evaluation can be seen as an integrated part of New Public Management. Despite differences in the emergence of evaluation in England and Denmark, it has been noted that all European Union member states are meeting strong demands for evaluations from the EU (Furubo, Rist and Sandahl, 2000). The evaluation field is diverse and there is a rich variety of evaluation approaches (Foss Hansen, 2005b). However, the goal-bound approach to evaluation seems to have won precedence over others within NPM. This paper discusses the limitations of the goal-bound approach in evaluating programmes for young people and how other forms of evaluation may play a part in increasing funders and politicians’ knowledge of the value of programmes.

Different approaches to evaluation

Some approaches to evaluation are outlined below and although described separately it is recognised that approaches are not mutually exclusive and we will argue that, in the evaluation of youth programmes, different approaches can complement each other to provide a rich picture of what is going on within a programme, and at the same time satisfy the need for public sector accountability. However, approaches to evaluation do have different philosophical positions and because of this follow different objectives (Plottu and Plottu, 2009). Ideally the evaluation approach should dependent on the purpose of an evaluation, asking questions such as: who is the evaluation for and why is it being conducted? In whose interests is the evaluation to be performed? (Schwartzman, 1983: 180) and what is the goal of the evaluation? Within New Public Management the purpose of evaluation is often public

accountability but evaluation can also contribute to public policy formation and improve the effectiveness of specific programmes (Schwartzman, 1983: 186).

It can be argued that the dominant evaluation paradigm is the goal-bound approach where the main aim is to judge the worth of a programme and identify causal links between inputs and outputs (Virtanens and Uusikyla, 2004). This summative type of evaluation, also called a result model because of its focus on goal attainment/performance within a programme (Foss Hansen, 2005b), has been described as managerial (Plottu and Plottu, 2009). This approach to evaluation is appropriate to use in programmes with clear goals as the evaluator has to relate the programme evaluated to the specific pre-determined goals (Foss Hansen, 2005b). Such evaluation is often viewed as neutral, value-free, and objective with the evaluator as an independent expert using scientific, quantified methods (Pollitt, 1999; Plottu and Plottu, 2009). They are often conducted for external, strategic, decision-makers, such as funding agencies or legislative bodies, and primarily reflect the perspectives of sponsors or management (Guyette and Churchman, 1981; Schwartzman, 1983; Plottu and Plottu, 2009).

As summative evaluation is concerned with the impact of a policy through the assessment of programme outcomes, they are often conducted after a programme or intervention is complete. This approach is often combined with experimental and quasi-experimental methods, such as randomised control trials to investigate whether the outcome could be related to factors other than the programme or policy. In relation to the context of this paper this would be understood as the creation of a programme for young people outside education and whether attendance at the programme leads to entry into education or employment.

Despite scientific methods often being regarded as robust, the results of such evaluations are often inconclusive in being able to demonstrate that impact is a result of the programme. It is argued that experimental evaluation models simplify programme realities in order to isolate discrete causes and effects (Schwartzman, 1983) through only focusing on how a certain intervention/programme relates to a specific set of targets. Goal-based evaluation is criticised for making the evaluator have 'tunnel vision' as they are so focused on measuring the extent to which intended objectives have been met they overlook other desirable and undesirable

outcomes (Guyette and Churchman, 1981: 11). However, it could be argued that the evaluator is fulfilling their objectives and what they are contracted to do as they are often only required to evaluate performance based on definable criteria (Bohni Nielsen and Ejler, 2008). The goal-based model, or rather the use of the model, is limited in use when dealing with complex issues or multiple objectives (Spicer and Smith, 2008) and does not open up the evaluator's perspective to other effects of a programme than those concerned with the pre-determined targets. This can be seen as narrow approach, especially in evaluating educational programmes dealing with complex issues such as youth unemployment and education. Furthermore, it may not give a realistic picture of the outputs of a specific programme when considering that some public services: 'such as education, only provide their benefits a long time after their immediate consumption' (Rouse, 1999: 79). The question that needs to be asked is how useful this type of evaluation is when considering the complexity of many educational and social programmes and the range of varying targets/objectives set for such programmes?

In both cases presented in this paper, some programme objectives were measurable, such as how many participants entered education or employment after attending the programme, although this linear measure for all young people is in itself problematic. Other objectives were defined in 'soft' terms including improved self-esteem and personal and social development. From this perspective it may be inappropriate to evaluate such programmes via 'simple comparative tests of achievement against objectives' (Kushner, 2000: 3-4). Such 'soft' aims are often intangible and occur over time and evaluations of policy interventions which aim to address complex and multi-faceted issues frequently cite the need for 'softer' or developmental outcomes to be considered and for 'measurable' ways to be developed to account for these (Dewson, *et al.,* 2000; Kent, 2002).

Formative and ethnographic evaluation

Public services and the lives of those engaged with them are often complex with programmes implemented to work with people in bespoke and developmental ways. As such, it is essential that the evaluative approach is reflective of the programmes being evaluated; they

should be able to account for complexity and context as well as impact and process (Craig, 2002; Spicer and Smith, 2008).

Formative evaluation, sometimes called process evaluation, explores the implementation and delivery of a policy or programme and is considered appropriate to use when ‘the evaluation is intended to create learning and thereby improve the programme in question’ (Foss Hansen, 2005b, 451). A formative evaluation is often initiated within a programme by ‘internal’ decision-makers and can be an ongoing process throughout the development of a programme. The purpose may be to help improve the programme and/or provide evidence that the people working in the programme are doing a good job. Internal evaluation has the advantage of providing a much greater understanding of organisational dynamics, histories, personalities and capabilities than goal-orientated summative evaluation (Guyette and Churchman, 1981).

Ethnographic evaluation has been identified as suitable for the purpose of formative evaluation in facilitating development and change (Guyette and Churchman, 1981; Schwartzman, 1983). There are clear differences between the aims of ethnography and the traditional aims of evaluation. Ethnographers are traditionally interested in culture, which changes slowly, and issues to be studied emerge over time and are process-oriented. They do not make judgements about the society studied or offer suggestions for making improvements. Evaluators will more often than not be required to address policy questions, raised by someone else and requiring immediate answers. They concentrate on outcomes and work to specific short-term deadlines, something that does not enable a long-term ‘traditional’ ethnographic study. Ethnographic evaluation does not totally adopt ethnographic methods but adapts the methods of data collection and analysis for the purpose of decision-making (Guyette and Churchman, 1981).

This approach is based on exploring multiple perspectives and is context sensitive, taking account of the everyday realities and complexities of the programme processes (Schwartzman, 1983). This enables the evaluator to develop an understanding of the programme being evaluated through an understanding of its culture and the context it exists

within, and the groups and individuals within this. Schwartzman (1983) identifies a number of goals of ethnographic evaluation including:

> "…the production of *contextual descriptions* of the "what, where, when, who, and how"…the discovery of the *internal evaluation system*…the use of *external evaluation methods* (researcher-introduced) in examining program actions and/or outcomes and to explore differences between internal and external evaluation systems and…the need to tie any recommended *program* changes or interventions to the program culture and its internal evaluation system (Schwartzman, 1983: 187 *emphasis in original)*

The internal evaluation system Schwartzman mentions is basically that which makes up the organisational culture. Schwartzman (1983) believes that ethnographic evaluation can untangle and understand this internal evaluation system by drawing on multiple perspectives in aiming to understand who judges the success and failure of programmes and whether participants judge a programme to work. This is paramount because any proposed changes will take place within this internal system. Recommendations are based on the evaluators' detailed knowledge of the programme culture which can be presented in the participants' language.

Another process evaluation approach was developed by Kushner (2000, 2002) who advocates a shift from an 'input to output' approach to evaluation, away from models emphasising outcomes and attempting to explain causality. Kushner (2002) talks about opening up the 'black box' to confront and understand the complexity of programme experience, process, politics and multiple aims. In this work programmes are understood and evaluated within the wider context of participants' lives. It is not possible to know if a programme is effective without knowing something about those that experience it and their experiences of it:

> "The intention is to invert the relationship between programme and person in such a way as to capture a more authentic view of the significance of a programme and its impact…Conventionally we portray programmes as context and locate people within them…we lose any sense of scale in attributing significance to a programme. In fact, we are vulnerable to over-emphasising significance through relentless focus on

> programme – to the point, often, where we create the impression that a programme may be the most significant event in certain people's lives…the person or event being observed may be more meaningfully located elsewhere…(Kushner, 2002: 5-6).

Despite the benefits of process evaluation outlined above, it has been identified that ethnographic research and evaluation are unlikely to satisfy the 'value for money' criteria of funding bodies who are looking for quick completion (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004) and who often want quantifiable outcomes of programmes rather than descriptions of interactions between participants of programmes. Furthermore, it can be argued that an in-depth approach to evaluation is too time intensive and therefore too expensive, to actually be a feasible method to use in programme evaluation. In an attempt to overcome the time issue in ethnographic research, Jeffrey and Troman (2004) suggest three time modes to make an ethnographic approach more flexible and beneficial to funders. Firstly, the compressed time model where the researcher spends a short period of time conducting intense ethnographic research. The researcher is engaged with a research site for a period of a few days to a month and either generates a range of observations and perspectives or focuses on a theme and generates a rich, detailed description of this. Secondly, the selective intermittent time mode which involves a longer time period but the frequency of visits is more flexible. On deciding the focus the researcher studies this in-depth for a sustained period. Thirdly, the recurrent time mode aims to establish similarities and differences over time using different visits to explore change and make comparisons. This third approach could be used to research the effects of change on an institution, group or set of individuals, for example the effects over time of the implementation of a new programme or policy (p. 542-3).

Despite the variety of approaches to evaluation, evaluation within the public sector still tends to focus upon the assessment of whether the end result has been achieved as an indicator of success. The focus on measurable outcomes, or only those outcomes which are measurable, in evaluation does not consider that getting to success may be complex and have multiple levels of meaning. It is argued that standard outputs are meaningless without understanding the process to get to the output (Thomas and Lambert, 2008) and that in order to undertake appropriate and meaningful evaluations, the underlying philosophy of the process, which is

often complex and not linear, must be understood (Chenhall, 2008). With this in mind, we now move on to describe our experiences of evaluating youth programmes.

Training programmes for young people in England

The example used for the English context is 'Life Skills' training programmes for young people aged 16-18. 'Life Skills' were part of a joint agency initiative called the Learning Gateway. Connexions were responsible for the front end of the delivery which included outreach, initial work with young people and the assignment of a Personal Adviser who developed an Individual Learning Plan (ILP) with the young person. Local Learning and Skills Councils (LLSCs) were responsible for the Life Skills training programmes. Those young people identified by their Personal Adviser as not ready to engage in mainstream provision and needing additional support were referred to the training programmes (DfEE, 1999). These programmes are now nationally called Entry to Employment (E2E) and the latter stages of this research were conducted during this transition.

The training programmes aimed to engage young people not in education, employment or training back into mainstream learning by providing individual tailored support. The three elements of the programmes were key and basic skills; personal development and pre-vocational and work-related opportunities (DfEE, 1999). Sixteen hours of weekly training was provided over a twenty-six week period, generally accompanied by a training allowance of £40.00 per week. There were on average twelve young people on a programme at one time and programmes worked on a 'roll-on-roll-off' basis which meant that people joined and left the programme at different times. Young people attended for various reasons but those in the target group for the initiative were identified as those excluded from school, non-attenders, care leavers, teenage parents, young offenders and all those young people who are disengaged from learning. They were described as being either:

- '*Disaffected by attitude* – e.g. as a result of school exclusion, long term truancy or low levels of school achievement, or
- *Disadvantaged by circumstances or characteristics* – e.g. homelessness, health problems, care history, family difficulties, offending behaviour' (DfEE, 1999a: 2)

The evaluation was part of a PhD and developed from a previous evaluation where there was a consensus about the difficulties of achieving targets for young people entering education, employment or training in time-constrained period. The reasons for this were multi-faceted but mainly related to the diverse and complex circumstances of the young people and the limited opportunities available to move them on in the defined way. The way in which the project workers communicated the impact was in terms of the positive steps that many young people had made during the course of the intervention. However, such individual achievements were difficult to demonstrate to funders and did not always end in the required outcome. This project overlapped with the introduction of the national Learning Gateway initiative which also had the aim of getting young people into education, employment or training.

As a result of this previous experience, contact was made with the manager of a number of the 'Life Skills' programmes and it was agreed that it would be useful to undertake a detailed, qualitative evaluation to observe young people's progress during their time on the programmes to document the positive steps made and understand the impact of these on the defined target. While 'Life Skills' programmes did have 'soft' objectives, the manager, programme workers and Personal Advisers all identified that their main aim was to get young people into education, employment or training – a clear tension which was a common feature of the evaluation. The objectives of the evaluation were to:

- Explore young people's and front-line workers' experiences and to evaluate the impact of programmes (through observations, focus groups and interviews)
- Engage young people at three points in time to document their progress (personal and social development) and the process towards the target of entry to education, employment or training
- Develop an approach which involved young people as active participants in the process, locating the programmes within the wider context of their lives (Kushner, 2000).

The evaluation did not aim to develop a way to measure the 'soft' outcomes. This has been attempted by others but still relies upon quantification and the linear definition of progress (Dewson, *et al.*, 2000). Instead it aimed to avoid the terminology around measurement. However, it is recognised that this may not be a realistic approach or a way forward in the context of the demand for evidence-based practice, and the need for external evaluations to provide evidence of effectiveness and value for money for funders, in many cases Government.

Despite coming from outside of the organisation this could be understood as an internal evaluation rather than an external evaluation. It was not commissioned by the sponsors of the programme but was developed by the manager of the programmes who was interested in recording the work undertaken in a different way from that which they had to account for it formally. This was despite 'soft' objectives being identified in the original specification – as other commented it seemed that the 'goal posts' had moved from empowerment and inclusion to only employment-related goals (Byshee and Hughes, 2002; Colley, 2003). A goal-based approach should actually take into account these 'soft' objectives but they are given no focus in favour of only knowing if the end result was achieved. Due to the difficulties in achieving the defined targets there was an interest among the workers in demonstrating how the work undertaken in the programmes with the young people. The manager recognised that evaluation could also contribute to organisational learning. However, initially the front-line workers may have seen me as being part of an evaluation system external to them as it was originally negotiated with the manager. It was over time that the use and benefit was understood by workers and the evaluation was not viewed as threatening. They described their experience of evaluators spending very little time at programmes and not really talking to the young people about their experiences. However, as we are aware there are reasons for evaluators taking such an approach.

It was agreed that the best way to achieve the evaluation objectives was to spend time with the programmes in order to build an understanding of what was involved in delivering them and to get a better sense of the young people and those that worked with them. After negotiation of access with the programme workers I spent the first six months at programmes

as participant observer. Initially I was told that it would be difficult to get an understanding of the programmes by only observing the activity and that I needed to involve myself in the daily activities and culture of the programmes. During the first six months I attended three programmes at least once a week and assisted in sessions at the programme location, attended activities outside the programmes and also attended residential trips. Not surprisingly, the young people were initially wary of my presence and it was only through spending time at the programmes that this cautiousness seemed to subside.

The two most beneficial aspects to this approach were building familiarity with the young people and the programme workers and developing an understanding of the everyday culture of the programmes. Focus groups and interviews were also conducted with young people and workers and I believe that the time spent as participant observer was a necessary step in building towards the introduction of these methods. Combining observations with the semi-structured methods also enabled issues of attribution to be explored. This was important as it was one of the tensions that workers struggled to demonstrate in evidencing the effectiveness of programmes. The combination of methods provided a sense of how both the workers and young people experienced the programmes and some examples have been included below to try and illustrate this:

While the programmes followed a weekly timetable of activities there could often be unpredictable occurrences that meant the workers had to be adaptable and responsive. There were numerous examples of young people arriving distressed and one worker having to spend, perhaps a whole morning, addressing the issues. This obviously impacted in the capacity of the other workers in working with the rest of the group. Other examples included young people not attending for a number of weeks and then returning to the programmes and a worker having to take time to find out about where they had been and what they had been doing. Such issues had to be prioritised and illustrated what the workers often described in terms of the tension between dealing with the immediate needs of the young people and the target of entry into education, employment or training. The unpredictability also inevitably had consequences for the evaluation which had to adapt in the same way the workers did.

While this was not too difficult to negotiate for this project this could be problematic for an external evaluation which has limited flexibility because of specific time scales and deadlines.

Most young people identified negative experiences of formal education. This not only meant that most did not have any formal qualifications but that they had significant barriers to learning. These barriers had to be addressed by the programme workers if they were to assist young people in entering education, employment or training. However this could be a lengthy process. Most young people identified themselves the need to work on their literacy and numeracy but they also noted this as the least favourite part of the programmes. Not being willing to engage in basic skills sessions seemed to manifest in the individuals in various ways, ranging from not turning up for sessions, being disruptive or unwilling to listen within sessions, silently not engaging.

In an attempt to involve the young people in the evaluation and to document their experience of the programme photography was used. The aim was to give the young people some control within the study and over what information they disclosed. It allowed them to document both aspects of the programme and their wider context and use them in discussion. This was, in the main, a useful method and young people engaged with it well. The photographs they took reflected the wider context of their lives and included the programme, their work placements, their family and friends and different aspects of their activities outside of the programmes. The photographs were useful in developing an understanding of the sometimes complex personal situations of the young people which impacted on their response to the programme. Many young people also shared the photographs with the workers and the workers found this a useful tool in helping their understanding of the young people's contexts.

The importance of 'small steps'

The evaluation was full of examples of the young people's development and as in other fields of informal education which have more recently been faced with notions of performance management these developments were often small but significant steps. These were the

developments that both young people and workers described when discussing their experiences and included changes in attitudes, punctuality, engagement, appearance and personal hygiene, outlook. Examples of raised levels of confidence included speaking out in the group, perhaps taking a lead in an activity, using public transport alone to get to the programme, going into the city centre, meeting other participants outside of the programme. The types of developments were as diverse as the young people and their needs and for some this could include being less aggressive, not drinking as much alcohol or smoking as much cannabis. One worker described this as moving along the register of improvement in their lives. However, as described above many setbacks were also observed. The programme workers faced a difficult task of providing bespoke support while at the same time having to work with a group of approximately 12, often very different, young people. The developments that were both observed and raised by young people and programme workers were organised thematically and also built into individual case stories presented in a final evaluation report.

Being realistic about evaluation and training programme policy

Previous commissioned research into training programmes in England identified that the nature of the client group and the tailored approach advocated for programmes meant it was impossible to make direct links to performance measures (Breen, 2000). Other research, also into training programmes, noted that the 'goal posts' had moved from the wider inclusion goals of the programmes to increased emphasis on the attainment of National Vocational Qualifications Level 2 on programme exit. This focus on output meant that it was not possible to demonstrate the full value of the programmes (Bysshe and Hughes, 2002: 7).

I believe that there were clear benefits of being able to conduct an evaluation in this way in being able to show the significant, intensive work undertaken with the young people. However, it also clearly highlighted that there was a fundamental tension in what the policy aimed to do and how this could be achieved in practice. The context of the target of entry into education, employment or training almost always framed the discussions with both programme workers and Personal Advisers. There is a significant underestimation of the

young people's developmental needs when joining programmes and the variation in young people attending programmes and the time it may take for them to enter education, employment or training. If this measurement of the success of programmes alone is relied upon then it will be difficult for programmes to reach the target. Furthermore, any understanding of the achievements of the programmes has to be understood within the macro social and economic context of employment opportunities for young people.

I am clearly aware that I was in a fortunate position to spend so much time conducting the evaluation and it is a luxury that mainly research students have (Jeffrey and Troman, 2004). It does raise the question of whether this is a realistic way to be able to conduct evaluation for external purposes. It is suggested that the documentation of progress and development could be incorporated more fully into training programmes and young people could be encouraged to lead on this and photography could be one of the methods incorporated into doing this. In the context of evidence-based practice and inspection regimes this would offer a processual view of the initiatives, an internal evaluation, that could be drawn upon in assessing their effectiveness.

AMUCK – a mentoring project for young people in Denmark

The example used to illustrate evaluation of youth programmes in Denmark is a project that was based within and managed by the Youth Guidance Centre in Copenhagen City Council. More specifically, the project was a mentoring project aimed at young men with immigrant backgrounds, aged between 15-20 and living in a part of Copenhagen that is officially branded a ghetto. The boys participating in the project had to be in one of the following three life situations:

- In the transition phase between lower and upper secondary school
- At risk of dropping out of an upper secondary education
- Dropped out of an upper secondary education.

The councillors in Copenhagen City Council agreed to implement the 95% target in 2003 (Copenhagen City Council, 2003) and as such it has guided the work with young people

within the council since then. A key player in working towards the target was – and still is – the Youth Guidance Centre run by the council. The Youth Guidance Centre is responsible for developing individual educational plans for the city's pupils in lower secondary school and providing guidance for all young people up until the age of 25. In 2003, 73% of young people in Copenhagen completed a youth education compared to 79% nationally (Copenhagen City Council, 2003). As the capital and the largest city in Denmark, the population of Copenhagen is culturally and ethnically diverse and in some areas 92% of the population have ethnic minority background (immigrants, descendants of immigrants or refugees) (Youth Guidance Centre Copenhagen, 2006). These are areas where the young people have poorer educational outcomes than the city as a whole and large proportions of adults (their parents) are not in employment (Youth Guidance Centre Copenhagen, 2006).

The Youth Guidance Centre in Copenhagen seems to live up to the part of the target within their primary control: Making sure young people continue on to youth education. However, as the dropout rates at some vocational upper secondary programmes in Copenhagen are as high as 49% (Confederation of Danish Employers, 2007) and the national dropout rate is 60% among young people with ethnic minority background (We need all youngsters, 2007) there is clearly the need for more work with young than planning future education.

One of the ways the Youth Guidance Centre in Copenhagen City Council has worked towards the 95% goal over the years has been through externally funded projects for specific groups of young people. These are mainly young people with a special need for guidance, those who have dropped out of education or for some reason have not continued into upper secondary education. A range of mentoring projects focusing on various target groups at risk of not completing upper secondary education was part of this agenda, for instance a three-year project paid for by the European Social Fund and aimed at young people at risk of social exclusion and then the AMUCK mentoring project, the example used in this paper.

AMUCK was paid by the Ministry for Refugees, Immigration and Integration and ran from 1st August 2004-31st December 2005. The mentoring itself only took place in 12 months of

the project time, while the rest of the time was spent planning, recruiting and training mentors. The author was the (internal) evaluator of the project and was also a part of the project group in order to make sure that evaluation issues were discussed as an integral part of the project. The following is based on the project application and the evaluation report published by the Copenhagen Youth Guidance Centre in 2006.

The assumption behind the project was that a corpse of young role models from ethnic minority backgrounds, working closely with youth guidance counsellors, could enable the young men to enter into or complete an upper secondary education. The men participating were selected by their youth guidance counsellor, who is equivalent to the Connexions personal adviser in England   The main target of the project was to support the participant in making an appropriate choice of upper secondary education (one they would complete), including return to uncompleted education. The main target was further broken down into the following objectives:

1. Supporting the participant in the process of clarifying interests, wishes and capability to hereby support them in their choice of education
2. Develop the participants competences and their knowledge of upper secondary education and the labour market
3. To prepare the target group on the complex problems that young people from ethnic minority can face in the Danish educational system
4. To contribute to a positive self-development.

13 young men participated in the project and the mentors spend an average of 2.5 hours a week working with each of them. In retrospect, it may be a bit naive to believe that such a short-term intervention could actually make a difference in the bigger picture.

A few words on the role the author/evaluator played within the organisation are appropriate here as this could be seen as a dual role as both part of an internal and external evaluation system. As an employee of the Youth Guidance Centre and normally with close relations to the front-line workers, developed when working together on previous projects and evaluations, the evaluation was integrated in the project, internal, and contributed to (or was

supposed to contribute to) the organisational learning and ongoing work with developing effective ways of reaching the 95% target. From an external evaluation perspective (the funder) it could be argued that this would be too subjective to form part of an external assessment of a piece of work because the evaluator will be acting in their own self-interest and will try to present their own organisation in an overly positive light. However, as the projects evaluated were mainly externally funded, the evaluations did also form part of justifying the spend of time and money in working towards the targets set out in project applications. And as external inspections or audits are always in projects like these it was always an aim of the evaluation to reflect spend of resources, activities, timescales and outcomes as realistically as possible, and in that sense the evaluator can be said to have played part in the external evaluation system – and was perceived as such by front-line workers.

When it came to determining how to evaluate the project there were three main considerations to make:

1. Timeframe and budget for evaluation
2. Appropriate evaluation methods considering the targets and the project
3. Matching the timeframe and budget with the method and make decision of evaluation approach?

To reflect on the second point first. Considering the nature of the project, the 'softer' objectives relating to individual self-development and the target group of young men it would have been appropriate to use a young person centred approach where the evaluator aims to develop a positive, personal relationship in order to become accepted by the young people to the point where they were willing to share their experiences (Kellett, Robinson and Burr, p.134). This could ideally have involved participant observations of the interactions between mentors and mentees in order to build up such a relationship. However, the reality was that the resources set aside for the evaluation was 20.000 Danish Kroner, approximately £2,000 and it was clear that it was not possible to pursue this approach and the evaluation consisted of:

- 3 x questionnaires distributed among the mentors

- 2x questionnaires distributed among the mentees
- Qualitative interviews with 3 mentees and their mentors
- Focus group interview with youth guidance counsellors attached to the project
- Written updates on work from the mentors.

The choice of a mixture of questionnaires and interviews was again a practical choice. The questionnaires were perceived as less time consuming (less expensive) than qualitative interviews but the value of the information provided via the questionnaires from the young people and the interviews was not really taken properly into consideration. It was in many ways, and in retrospect not surprising, really difficult to interview young people sticking to narrow targets. First of all I did not have much knowledge about the young people prior to the interviews and therefore only a generic set of questions relating to the targets were asked. Secondly there was a limited timeframe for each interview and thirdly the young people did not have any knowledge of me other than what their mentors had told them: I was evaluating the project.

Again in retrospect it can be asked if this evaluation was sufficient when considering the objectives, for instance how is contribution to positive development to be captured?, a question never really successfully clarified within the project group. The evaluation to a large extend had to focus on the issues that could be quantified. The project was aimed at young men with a complexity of issues to deal with and therefore an evaluation would have to capture this complexity in order to give realistic accounts of what goes on. However, it is not possible to disregard the constraints on time and money within the public sector. A more in-depth evaluation of a project like this would have cost more than the project itself. However, it does raise the question of the value of the evaluation, and the use of the results, if they are not a realistic reflection of events - how can the evaluation contribute to the development of new programmes and provide funders with a realistic picture of what they get for their money?

Looking at the measurable outcomes of the project relating to completion of upper secondary education the evaluation report states that all 13 participants applied to enter into upper

secondary education during or after participating in the project – although 4 dropped out again fairly soon after (it was part of the evaluation to follow the participants progress shortly after leaving the project, via their mentors, but due to budget and time constraints it was unfortunately not possible to follow them on a longer term basis to follow their progress). Does this then mean that the project was a success? From a statistical point of view, no, as all would have been likely to apply anyway and 60% would have dropped out (roughly speaking). But the question is if it makes sense to judge this type of short-term intervention in this way?

One of the main conclusions in the evaluation report was that while there were overall targets set out in the project plan, in reality each mentee and their mentor ended up setting individual targets for their work in the project period (Copenhagen Youth Guidance Centre, 2006). This was because the young men were not in similar life situations and as such it would not be relevant to put them through a one size fits all process. But the question is how can this be reflected in a very small scope evaluation where there is not much room for the individual story? The answer is that it cannot to any large extent but some of the individual targets and activities were set out in the evaluation report including:

- Getting up in the morning
- Getting a job
- Setting up a bank account and saving money for a drivers license
- Using initiative
- Getting to know the world outside Nørrebro/MjølnerParken

While these are likely to be positive for each individual it does not necessarily say anything about their ability to complete an upper secondary education at a later stage and as such it is hard to reflect on how the project contributed to the 95% target. An interesting aspect of projects like this is that while project and service managers see the main objective as reaching the 95%, front-line workers often seem to have different agendas, such as 'helping, being a friend, being a confidant', in many ways realising that it takes more than a short-term programme to get some young people into education.

Discussion

Policy documents do recognise that many young people's lives are complex and multi-dimensional (DfES, 2002, 2005) and therefore, policy initiatives often have multiple aims including personal and social development, notably increasing confidence and self-esteem. Despite this recognition such areas rarely form part of evaluating the impact of interventions where measurable outputs define the success of the policy implementation. They also draw on a linear concept of transition into education, employment or training, which youth research has documented does not adequately consider young people's lives (Ball, *et al.,*2000; Cohen and Ainley, 2000). The aim of entry to education, employment and training is important and not counter to what young people and workers want but the sole focus upon this as the measure of success misses crucial aspects of practice which are the foundations of achieving this aim (Spence, 2004). The progression of inputs through to outputs in such services does not relate to practice (Ord, 2005). The use of the end result as an indicator of quality does not account for many other factors that influence a persons' educational decisions outside the realm of their educational experience and beyond the control of the institution and may include unplanned events. This focus not only does not consider the interplay of structure and agency but actually deflects attention from deeper problems of social inequality (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001).

All of this leads back to the earlier discussion about different philosophical approaches to evaluation and the question about how to integrate alternative evaluation approaches into more target-driven work within New Public Management. The key questions, perhaps, that need to be considered above all else in evaluation are: what is the purpose of the evaluation? And, in whose interest is the evaluation to be performed? (Schwartzman, 1983). Furthermore, what is their concept of evaluation? The decisions that go into making the choice about the evaluation models to be used is an under-researched area and there is very little knowledge of why specific choices are made (Foss Hansen, 2005b). Using appropriate evaluation methods has to be understood within the context of, and matched to, the specific time frame and budget often set externally by funders. The time modes set out earlier by Jeffrey and Troman (2004) may assist in the development of an appropriate approach within a specified time frame. There is a role for evaluators in making sure funders understand what

type of information each type of evaluation model can provide, for example, if the decision is made to use questionnaires then they cannot be expected to be provided with stories and rich pictures. There is also a role for evaluators in making clear that if evaluating short-term interventions that it may be unlikely for the evaluation to capture change and development and that in programmes dealing with complex social and personal issues it can be difficult to establish attribution, especially in the short-term. If evaluation continues to have a narrow focus then it is only really going to serve what has been constructed as public accountability; whether certain, measurable, targets are being met. This denies many other positive aspects of programmes and the role evaluation can play in contributing to public policy development and improving the effectiveness of specific programmes (Schwartzman, 1983).

The current approach does not acknowledge that dealing with young people's complex personal and social problems is a significant part of the work undertaken by front-line workers. Every young person begins the programme with a history and this cannot be ignored if targets are going to be met. Both programmes specified the personal and social development of young people as an objective, and this was evidenced in 'small steps' such as getting up in the morning, using public transportation alone, speaking out in the group. However, these more difficult to measure, 'softer' outcomes, are not seen as being as significant in the official understanding of the performance of the programmes. This is because they are not easily quantifiable. These are individual developmental steps for young people who have all started from different places. It could be suggested that it is not appropriate to try to quantify everything but that these developments could be documented within programmes to recognise young people's progress.

This is where a change of perspective is relevant. If the aim of the evaluation is to follow the development of individuals then it is important to involve those individuals and establish familiarity with them to find out what is important to them. Our experience tells us that it is difficult to interview young people by only sticking to narrow targets and without knowing them and their context. As a result, very little is learned from such limited involvement. Involving participants in a more in-depth way puts demands on evaluators and funders to understand what methods are appropriate and relevant for evaluation. This may mean a

broader perspective and wider knowledge of methods. If such an approach is taken it is important to be aware of the need to be flexible and deal with unpredictable realities of the programmes and young people.

It must be recognised that evaluation is part of the New Public Management system and that the measurable targets are an integrated part of this system. As discussed earlier, a fundamental element of this relates to a low level of trust in public sector employees in combination with a focus on value for money. The impact of policy driven pressures can result in criticisms of those implementing Government initiatives for prioritising meeting targets over clients' needs (Colley and Hodkinson, 2001). It has been argued that tensions between delivering tailored support and the pressure to meet external targets, along with fear of sanctions, could lead to a fabrication of performance (Ranson, 2003) and limit opportunities even further for young people with personal or educational difficulties (Hodkinson and Bloomer, 2001). As such, the focus on measurable outputs actually distorts the performance and success of an organisation/programme (Clarke, 2003). This does not consider that such workers may use their discretion (Lipsky, 1980) to manage and successfully negotiate this context. Nevertheless, the focus only upon the output of such employees means that the work they do undertake is unaccounted for. In our experience front-line workers have a realistic outlook while working within the constraints of the system. To develop an in-depth understanding of the implementation of policies it is important to include their perspectives in evaluation.

Conclusion

The preoccupation with 'making things measurable' in pubic services also dominates the forms of evaluation adopted (Craig, 2002). The main interests of funders/Governments' seem to primarily to lie in measurable findings which they understand as demonstrating the effectiveness of the intervention, mistaking these as quantifiable models of quality (Ranson, 2003). There may just to be a paradox in using this type of evaluation to assess the success of educational programmes: on the one hand politicians/funders want to ensure 'value for money' and measurement of results and goal-based evaluations are seen as key to finding out

if targets are met and if public sector employees are delivering what they are supposed to. On the other hand, it may just be that these forms of evaluations currently focus too narrowly on specific targets and in doing so miss out on crucial elements of a programme. What seems to be clear is that this form of evaluation alone cannot provide a realistic account of performance and outcomes. It should be combined with an evaluation approach developed as integral to the programme in order to contribute to organisational learning. This also broadens the benefits of conducting evaluation beyond the requirement to meet public accountability. Ideally this would lead to evaluation becoming part of the culture within programmes, rather than just an external imposition, and a way for front-line workers and young people to evaluate the intervention by considering what happens during the programmes rather than primarily focusing on the output.

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