

Evidence and Impact

Essay Collection

**Beyond outcomes:
Preserving the long term
impact of youth work**
- Jane Melvin

Beyond outcomes: Preserving the long term impact of youth work



Jane Melvin

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I became a youth worker because I believed – and still believe – that all young people have the right to aspire to and achieve what they want from life, but that some young people need more support in attaining these goals than others.

As a young person, I benefitted from youth work and experiential education through the medium of outdoor activity, and it was with through the unwavering support and with the encouragement of my youth workers that my own youth work career began. Ironically, I didn't realise that I attended a youth club for most of my teenage years: I just went there to kayak and take part in other adventurous sports, such was the subtlety of my youth workers' practice.

As a newly qualified teacher of outdoor education, I went straight into youth work, returning to my old club with a group of young people. My aim was, simply, to provide an experience of kayaking outside the canal basins of London.

Only then did I realise exactly where I was and the context within which I had developed my own skills as an informal educator. If Dave, my youth worker, were alive today, demonstrating the outcomes and impact that his life's work had achieved would not be difficult. If he could have brought us all together, the outcomes, impact and praxis (applying learning into transferable situations) would have resonated in the stories that we told, reminiscing about the good times and the challenging and fun experiences that we had.



Sadly, in these days of targeted youth support, fixed-term casework and time-limited projects, many youth workers are denied the opportunity to look at the longitudinal impact that universal services for young people achieve; how youth work practice continues to impact on individuals long into their adulthood. Impact and praxis go hand in hand, but I would suggest that, that at their most powerful, they are long term ambitions, with some of the most compelling evidence contained in stories that can only be told long after the event.

Having been caught up in many debates over the years about the measurement of youth work outcomes and impact, I often find myself considering this question: Is there is another way to approach what is often a flawed and unrepresentative way of capturing what young people gain from their engagement with youth workers?

I say flawed and unrepresentative partly because the importance of process gets missed and there is difficulty in the attribution of causality. Youth work practice today plays a role in a wide variety of social care, social cohesion, youth justice, leisure, recreational and educational settings and it is therefore often difficult to disaggregate the contribution that youth workers specifically have made.

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For instance, in terms of measuring outcomes and impact, it is assumed that the relationship between a youth work intervention and young people’s subsequent learning and behaviour is not *“...entirely non-causal [and] it would be foolish to say there is no relationship between what youth workers do and the outcomes that emerge. There may be some merit in conceptualising the process of youth work as being ‘indirect causality’...”* (Ord, 2014: p61).

However, how much do we really know about what actually contributes to young people’s learning and development and, in turn, the positive outcomes achieved?

Systematic reviewing, reflection and evaluation enables youth workers to recognise progression in order to demonstrate that their work is making a difference to young people’s lives. Identifying actual longer-term impact and praxis, however, is problematic since they are not always visible or recognisable and, of necessity, take time to come to fruition.

For example, a youth and community worker working with young people to lobby local councillors about the lack of leisure facilities in their area, can, perhaps, ‘claim’ the generic soft skills that young people indicate that they have gained along the way – team work, public speaking skills, campaigning experience, enhanced political awareness – but what of the profound impact on, say, the one young person who goes on to stand as a local councillor 10 years later, and who in the intervening time, continues to hone and apply the skills gained through praxis? And did the outcomes of team work, public speaking, campaigning, and raised political awareness occur as a direct result of the youth worker’s interventions, or were the young people, for instance, involved in a citizenship project at school that had also promoted these skills?

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A new skate park built 5 years later, as a result of the initial and on-going campaign, represents impact, undeniably. The young people who initiated the campaign, however, have likely moved on, so to whom is the impact attributed?

In instances like this, identifying soft outcomes at any one point of the project is fairly straightforward, but identifying 'hard' outcomes that demonstrate young people's learning is more difficult and often appears to contradict the person-centred positioning of youth work practice (Bradford, 1999) that says that it is also okay to 'fail'.

The skate park, as per this example, not being built is also okay, because it is the learning gained by young people along the way that counts. What, however will be remembered? Will it be the 'hard' evidence of the skate park being either built or not built? Or will it be the individual learning that takes place for each young person involved over the course of those 5 years? Which be accorded the status of true impact?

In preventative work, it is often impossible to know whether praxis has taken place. Consider the example of working with young people to prevent teenage pregnancy.

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Has the intervention worked or not?

If a young woman taking part does not get pregnant, it does not necessarily mean that she is acting on or applying the learning in an informed way: it might simply mean that she did not have sex during the period that the work was being measured. The issue of evidencing prevention is a significant problem for those engaged in youth and community work, with youth workers often unwilling to 'claim' outcomes and impact for which there might also be indirect causality, those regarding which they cannot categorically demonstrate that their intervention has produced the outcome. Praxis is even more difficult to assess, since with interventions centred on prevention or harm minimisation, 'nothing happening' is, in itself, an outcome. Whilst this is might seem meaningful in some contexts, a young person not reoffending, for example, can youth workers actually be certain that behaviour has changed, or is it just that the young person has not been caught again?

Recent work with colleagues from the Surrey County Council Youth Support Service has piqued my interest. They have deliberately moved away from measuring the outcomes and impact attributed to young people's learning and development, and towards assessing the quality



of the youth work intervention itself. Using the NYA Quality Mark as a basis for measurement, the intervention is not prescribed, working on the assumption that it is difficult to achieve and maintain the Quality Mark, if the outcomes for young people are not achieved. This puts the onus firmly on practitioners to deliver high quality interventions, rather than focusing on the starting point of the young people involved or the end result achieved.

In a context of target-chasing, it is possible to deliver interventions that are only 'good enough', with Dewey noting that "instead of by a comprehensive, constructive survey of actual needs, problems and possibilities" (1938: 6), educators can get caught up in an input-output model that ignores the most important part of the intervention: how high quality engagement with young people results in greater possibilities for praxis and longer-term impact.

Even the 'What Works' initiative does not focus on practice in that way, the education Toolkit having been created with the contribution of "...over 10,000 pieces of quantitative educational research...which allows teachers and school leaders to compare the estimated impact and cost of different types of educational intervention..." (What Works Network, 2014: p15). 'What Works' is perhaps a bit of a misnomer: when the exemplar of peer tutoring is given (ibid: p13), we are not told how this is accomplished in relation to peer tutors being chosen and trained, what support is given prior to starting a peer tutoring process, or what goes into supporting and maintaining this process successfully. We are simply told that this process gives successful outcomes.

Today, another shift is taking place. Targeted youth support (TYS) agendas and inter-professional working mean that the work of youth and community workers is not so much directed by the idea of a curriculum with its roots in informal educational practice, as by the role of "...border pedagogues... at the edge of [young people's] communities..." (Khan, 2013:

"Our young people have a right to the best quality interventions and we have a duty to provide them."

p103).

Many youth workers now are pushed towards this approach by dictates, fueled by moral panic over a 'feckless' youth generation (Cohen, 1972). Lave and Wenger, discussing their ideas of situated learning, talk about peripheral participation (1991) that is conducted in a "locale of visibility and invisibility" (Khan, 2013: p104). This describes youth and community workers working with young people on the margins, with those who are disadvantaged, disenfranchised or seen politically, and in popular media, as some kind of moral underclass or threat (Levitas, 2006). Here, causality becomes a bigger issue, due to this 'invisibility', which, while supporting youth workers to engage positively with young people where no other profession can, can contribute to the impact of the work being ignored, not recognised or not acknowledged. The case of youth workers' role in relation to the recent child exploitation in Rotherham (Jay, 2014) is a potent and topical example.

Documenting and evaluating the quality of interventions, rather than focusing on the symptom of 'young people needing positive outcomes', enables best practice to be shared and replicated.

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This has the benefit of raising the profile of the work, thus contributing to a wider set of practice responses across the board.

It also, contradicting the frequent argument against this approach, satisfies those with a lens of ‘value for money’. An intervention, measured as excellent against identified quality indicators must, intrinsically, also offer good value. My contention is that solely identifying the outcomes and impact for young people does not, as it only tells us what young people within a particular context and time-frame have (perhaps) achieved and not how successful youth work practice can be maintained.

Our young people have a right to the best quality interventions and we have a duty to provide them.

Is an outcome-driven model is the best way to achieve a healthy youth and community sector in the future? Is it, even, the best way to achieve the best outcomes or the most lasting impact?



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- Resources to support meaningful impact measurement

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