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# Youth *Work*

Research and Positive Practices in Work with Young People

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## The Journal of Youth Work: research and positive practices in work with young people

The Journal of Youth Work provides a forum for critical reflection on practice and for the dissemination of research that contributes to the development of youth work and to understanding the conditions in which young people live, rest, work and play. The Journal is concerned with the transfer of knowledge about issues that affect young people and about analysis of the circumstances that enable them to flourish. The Journal provides a forum for academics and practitioners to pose problems, consider policy and practice, and create hopeful multidisciplinary conversations. At its core, the Journal seeks to reverse age-based discrimination, to ensure that young people thrive and are regarded in a positive light by each other and by the rest of society. The Journal is therefore concerned with, for example, education, health, housing and policy fields, including interests in social and cultural capital, social psychology and a variety of other contemporary research and practice matters. Drawing often, but not exclusively from Scottish experience, the Journal is published online three times a year and contains refereed articles, research papers, policy analysis and book reviews. It is addressed to academic specialists, researchers and practitioners in a range of disciplines and to those involved in making policies affecting young people.

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## **EDITORIAL: SPECIAL EDITION**

Welcome to the latest edition of the *Journal of Youth Work*; an on-line publication that is committed to discussing a range of current topics and international perspectives relating to youth work practice and young people.

This special edition has been published to coincide with, and add value to, the discussions that took place at the Youthlink Scotland's Conference, in Youth Work Week, November 2012. The conference theme was "Youth Work: Rising to the Challenge, Delivering Outcomes". The journal is very pleased to be associated with Youthlink and to support the conference by providing academic text that stimulates debate. It is hoped that these written contributions will help to stimulate youth workers into further developing their own practice understating by reflecting and articulating on their experiences of "delivering outcomes".

Taken together, the articles in this edition, point to the need for, and shed light on, the debate about the utility of outcomes to youth work practice. These contributions also articulate the need for the right type of, and sources of, evidence and articulate the need for practice-based solutions to inform and improve youth work practice. Again, the articles point to the need for robust research practices that are in keeping with youth work's value base and recognise the voice of the learner.

The first article, by McGinley and Mackie, questions whether the current promotion of, and increasing reliance on, outcome-based practice is a sound way to both promote and sustain youth work practice. The concerns articulated include the intellectual and procedural rigour of outcome-based practice, its central resonance with the Scottish Government's requirements and its questionable capacity to enhance youth work practice. They argue for youth work to be set free from government control so that youth work can work on the deep seated problems facing young people and engage with them in a way that enables them to make a contribution to society which they determine.

The second article, written by McArdle and Briggs, reports on a Scottish Study using action research methodology that delineates a participative and productive form of research activity relevant to youth workers to utilise. Their research uncovered a range of methods adopted to generate creative and individualised evidence. It also identified that the evidence identified was used for many purposes including reflection, continuing professional development (CPD) and practice



improvement. They authors suggest a mixed methods approach to data collection to develop a statistics and stories approach. They also identified three categories within the evidence relative to best evidence; qualities, impact and process and four categories of required support that included resources, feelings and legitimatisation. The final contribution cogently co-authored by Bamber, Rowley and Power, outlines the need to generate reliable “evidence” from a range of sources to create a strong knowledge base that aims to “improve rather than prove” the practice. This article makes a valuable contribution in advancing the notion of an evidence informed approach to youth work that is based on an evidence matrix, a review of academic literature, provision of a quality standards matrix and a set of resources for further reference and use. They also helpfully identify the impacts that youth work can make in the “meso” level in society, an area that is often ignored but which could provide a reliable source of evidence.

In the book review for this edition Jan Wilmington recommends a book on Emotional Intelligence, which encourages youth workers to become more self aware so that they can work more effectively with others. In keeping with the conversation in this edition, Jan recognises the importance of creating the space for critical reflection within the practice and highlights the need for the pathway to be determined from within.

Finally, I hope that these articles in this special edition add to the consideration around the need, purpose and use of evidence in youth work. In this discussion about the relevance and demands of outcomes it is very gratifying to recognise the inventiveness and courage of those youth workers who, in spite of many restrictions, including a contestable performance management system, still manage to produce appropriate and imaginative forms of evidence to enhance practice.

**Brian McGinley,  
Editor**

# OUTCOMES FOR YOUTH WORK: COMING OF AGE OR MASTER'S BIDDING?

Brian McGinley, University of Strathclyde and Gordon Mackie University of Strathclyde

## Abstract

*Providing evidence in youth work is a current and important debate. Modern youth work has, at least to some degree, recognised the need to produce practice information, through its various guises, with limited success as requirements and terminology have continually changed. In Scotland, the current demands for youth work to “prove” itself are through a performance management system that promotes outcome-based practice. There are some difficulties with this position because outcome-based practice lacks methodological rigour, is aligned with national governmental commitments and does not adequately capture the impact of youth work practice.*

*This paper argues that youth workers need to develop both a theoretical and methodological approach to data collection and management, which is in keeping with practice values, captures the voice of the young person and enhances youth work practice. Youth work should not be used as a mechanism to deliver the government's policies but be liberated from centralist control to become a “free practice” so that some of the perennial problems, such as democratic disillusionment, partly caused by this “performance management industry”, can be effectively dealt with. The generation of evidence for youth work should enable it to freely investigate and capture its impact, within the practice, based on the learning that has taken place, the articulation of the learners' voice with the most appropriate form of data presentation.*

## Introduction

The centrality of producing quality evidence for youth work has been increasingly known and accepted over time. However, youth workers have been reluctant to uncritically accept performance frameworks that do not capture what they know matters in youth work. This could be interpreted as a reluctance to become accountable but it could be equally ascertained that such reticence reflects concerns about protecting the quality of the youth work relationship and ensuring that any adopted system adequately reflects the nature of such relationships and the other purposes of youth work.

This paper questions the development of outcome-based practice (OBP) to assess if it is rooted in the dominant paradigm of performance management that promotes power, control and political concerns or if its primary interest is concentrating on practice development and learner growth. Additionally, the paper investigates the

tensions between policy with its potential impact on youth work practice and seeks to uncover what is the principal role being asked of the youth worker under this type of performance management system.

As a starting point for this desk based research, it is held that the management of data is not value free and therefore it is important that evidence is collected and managed in a way that is in keeping with its intended use, in this case concomitant with youth work practice values. To this end, youth workers need to both identify and adhere to a preferred choice of theoretical positioning that is professionally justifiable. Therefore, the debate about outcomes is not just about the impact of services but are also about who owns and judges youth work practice. Central to this discussion is recognition of the tension between top down, dominant discourses and the ethical drive to ensure democratic growth and empowerment from the 'bottom up'.

### **Framing the outcomes debate**

Traditionally, there has been a continuous difficulty in communicating a unified sense of what youth work stands for and does. It has been particularly troublesome to those who are not involved in creating the practice including policy makers, funders and the general public. There are many reasons for this continuing situation including the complexity of the practice, the variety of its operating circumstances and the ever changing social context of, and demands upon, its operation.

Notwithstanding, for some time, there has been a discussion within youth work about the relative importance of both process and outcome. Historically, this debate had centred on the youth work practice itself by articulating whether the focus of youth work should be on what the young person had achieved or whether it was more helpful to concentrate on the process, the method, the journey travelled. Often, this debate has centred on the relative merits of process, product and practice (see Ord 2007). However, in addition to this, youth work has been concerned, at least over the past 50 years, with issues of monitoring and evaluating practice. There was, for example, in the 1970's and 1980's an attempt to instil a process of management by objectives (based on the work of Drucker, 1976) into the practice. Allied to this, evaluation processes formed an increasingly important part of the practice in terms of imaginative questions posed in search of value rather than measurement (see Rogers & Smith 2006). However, this changed over time when evaluation became more statistically oriented with a decreasing use in value because it became part of the performance management system that maintained rather than challenged the status quo (Gitlin & Smyth 1989).

As performance management systems increasingly took hold, Learning Evaluation and Planning (LEAP, 2007), was introduced in various guises from around 2001, as an attempt to develop a systematic way of determining the inputs, outputs and outcomes of community learning and development (CLD) in Scotland, including youth work. Whilst this development involved practitioners by attempting to address concerns about process and values, it was driven by national agendas and funded by central government to determine outcomes for this work. Interestingly, the LEAP performance framework was developed in tandem with a new inspection regime for CLD, which made its true nature and intention more obvious. So, it could be judged that rather than proving to be a useful tool for self-evaluation, it became a policy ploy for practice inspection and failed to produce the robust evidence to question the paucity of financial or human resources input to CLD that workers sought.

As we can identify from the above, the focus of debate shifted from an internal practice dialogue to an externally driven conversation about 'worth' and 'accountability', which are framed by systems of performance management. These drivers have seen policy advocate and support an OBP (Scottish Government 2008) that, arguably, has become increasingly part of a managerialist discourse which demands external verification, in terms of outcomes, from youth work practice. Additionally, this has evolved into a New Public Management (Pollitt & Bouchaert, 2011; Hood, 1995) quest that aims to make the public sector more 'efficient' by employing private sector tools such as business management techniques, of which outcomes are a part.

Not all commentators agree that the best way to make public services more effective is to employ the thinking and tools from the private sector. In fact some argue that these are fundamentally different entities that carry out divergent functions (Boston et al 1996). Therefore, to transpose key ideas from one type of organisation to the other is unsound and is perhaps based more on political ideology rather than driven by a thirst for service improvement.

Boston et al (1996) identify a range of differences between private and public sector organisations that are often ignored when attempting to implement reforms. The differences include the formal, legal operating constraints, political influences, public scrutiny, organisational performance, complexity of objectives, evaluation and decision criteria and the personal characteristics of employees. This structural recognition may help to point to one of the main reasons why performance

management is not universally welcomed nor proven to be worthwhile in the public sector. To take this further, it may be that one of the major reasons why youth workers have not fully embraced performance management is because it fails to recognise their professionalism and value base, which shapes the way it generates the practice.

The principles and values identified by the CLD Standards Council for Scotland are:

- Self-determination – respecting the individual and valuing the right of people to make their own choices.
- Inclusion – valuing equality of both opportunity and outcome, and challenging discriminatory practice.
- Empowerment – increasing the ability of individuals and groups to influence issues that affect them and their communities through individual and/ or collective action.
- Working collaboratively – maximising collaborative working relationships in partnerships between the many agencies, which contribute to CLD, including collaborative work with participants, learners and communities.
- Promotion of learning as a lifelong activity – ensuring that individuals are aware of a range of learning opportunities and are able to access relevant options at any stage of their life. (Standards Council 2011)

As we can glean from the above statement, values are an important facet of youth work culture and practice that establish and reinforce the need for people themselves to decide the shape and extent of their learning and for this not to be prejudged or judged externally. Such values can be threatened if an outcome driven culture becomes dominant to such an extent that the “tail wags the dog”. Of course, for the youth worker, the impact of what they do is important but equally valid are the values of starting where a person is at, encouraging them to determine the nature, pace and extent of the learning and to inculcate a relationship that is neither defined nor judged in terms of a predetermined framework or on external aspirations. These encoded frameworks are much more pertinent to formal education environments in where both the direction and destination of the learning journey to be travelled are prescribed in advance and judged against preset standards. This potential disparity, between internal commitments and external demands, has potentially considerable ethical implications from analysing the ethical code of practice which would suggest that outcomes should not be externally or pre determined and that the judgements about what happens in youth work (CLD) should be a matter with the professional relationship rather than imposed from outside (see [http://www.cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/files/CLD\\_Code\\_of\\_Ethics.pdf](http://www.cldstandardscouncil.org.uk/files/CLD_Code_of_Ethics.pdf)).

So, while the notion of outcomes may be a useful mechanism in the predictable, linear product development world of the private sector; its value is questionable when working with people and especially young people who are developing an increased sense of self which is by its very nature is organic, fluid and unpredictable. In the latter situation it may be more helpful for participants to be encouraged to reflect on their learning in terms of journey; where they are in relation to their starting point rather than seeking destination or outcome. As we know, youth work is far from a predictable practice and outcome may not be the best rationale on which to base an assessment of this practice.

Although it may be helpful for young people to use such tools as “Step it Up’ (2003) to judge their emotional and social development, these are most productive when used in a context of voluntary, self assessed and personal use. To attempt to utilise such frameworks to assess service impact would be to ignore issues of social inequity of the person’s starting point. In fact any attempt at judgement which is either decontextualised or ahistorical ensures that the individual learning journey is viewed in isolation and any perceived problems with progress are attributed to individual pathologies. Again, a further concern of using these frameworks to judge worth is that auditors end up comparing fundamentally different things yet claim their comparability.

To explore this further, one of the questions that need to be considered in this debate is to determine what the intention of outcome-focused work is and also to establish whether this is really about performance capability, scrutiny and accountability or something else. If this is a performance issue to the extent that the Government, and its agents want to satisfy themselves that youth work is doing a good job then they are duty bound to provide a mechanism that enables youth workers to demonstrate the necessary knowledge skills and competence but it is debatable whether this should be a performance management systems based on outcomes. Yet, there is no doubt that in recent years the Scottish Government is promoting and supporting an outcome-focused practice for Community Learning and Development (CLD) (Scottish Government 2008).

Although the theoretical underpinning of outcome-based practice (OBP) is not evident, nevertheless, the dominant approach to performance management is more consistent with, for example, an open systems theoretical perspective, that treats organisations as objects (Tyler et al 2009:30), which is not relevant to youth work because it is not systematic and predictable but is full of surprises and “is volatile and voluntary, creative and collective – an association and conversation without guarantees.” ([www.indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk/wordpress](http://www.indefenceofyouthwork.org.uk/wordpress))

If youth work is to demonstrate 'effectiveness' under an appropriate performance management system then it requires: a clear, agreed and workable operating framework; a helpful, proactive system of monitoring and support; an easy to use set of resources and tools; and access to reliably informed, and readily accessed, advice. Is this what is on offer?

### **Exploring recent Government Policy on youth work**

Youth work is a complex practice that takes many different forms – detached youth work, outreach, youth clubs, mobile centres, award schemes, specific identity groups, information services and counselling services, to name but a few (Ingram, 2001:17). However, some have argued that there is a lack of "proof" about youth work 'effectiveness' and that it is often at the margins of mainstream practice where successful examples of youth interventions can be found. A recent piece of research in New Zealand (Fouche, et al 2010) aimed to review over 40 pieces of international evidence on the worth and validity of youth work. Using a largely positivist and narrow epistemology, they concluded that none of the documents were valid and therefore reached the conclusions that they could not verify the outcomes of youth work. (A Select Committee concluded similarly for England and Wales). However, Bennett et al (2003:82) identify good practice in not-for profit and project based organisations but warn that autonomy can be undermined by strands of accountability based on standard assessments, evaluations and outcomes. What could be happening here is that the truths about the practice are not being revealed because the mistaken tools are being used from an inappropriate perspective, which leads to invalid conclusions. Thus, the subtleties of human flourishing are set within a policy context which is dictating the discourse and determining what questions are asked, which data is generated and which conclusion are drawn. So what is this policy context?

The Moving Forward strategy (2007) document provides an indication of the policy context for recent youth work practice in Scotland. The document sets out a range of intended outcomes and associated actions without any discussion about whether outcomes are an appropriate approach for a youth work strategy. On critical analysis of this document, the vast majority of the 21 outcomes are focused on building a national youth work infrastructure in recognition of the poor conditions through which youth work has operated in the past. Therefore, the focus of this strategy is on the development of initial and continuous training, increased resources, better facilities and joint ways of working. It also emphasises the importance of evaluations and positive impacts, which raises the old chestnut questions about the purpose and benefits of youth work.

Selected quote from the document help to emphasise the current Government's concentration on outcomes:

*"2.2 Youth work must continue to look forward with focus and with ambition for its role. Modernising and changing, it will be right at the forefront of delivering the best possible outcomes for every young person in Scotland".*

*"2.3 The outcomes we seek from youth work are the same as we seek from schools, that is, that young people become successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens, and that they make a successful transition to life after school, taking advantage of and sustaining opportunities in education, employment or training".*

*"2.10 ....what we can do is to support the sector in getting the best possible value from the resources they do have. Local authorities and voluntary organisations must be able to focus on delivering the best outcomes for young people".*

*"2.11 Our focus must be firmly on achieving greater opportunities, influence and outcomes for individual young people with resulting benefits for their communities and society in general".*

*"2.15 We recognise that we need to work better across the Executive to promote the role and benefits of youth work and youth work methods. And how they can contribute to the successful delivery of wide-ranging policies and broad-based positive outcomes for young people".*

*"The Outcome we want: For the value, unique nature, and contribution of youth work to be recognised and reflected in a broad policy context, contributing to achieving wide-ranging positive outcomes for young people".*

*3.5 Each year, we commission HMIe to conduct reviews of a sample of national voluntary youth organisations. In line with other changes in inspections, HMIe is reviewing its approach to these voluntary organisation reviews. The new focus will place greater emphasis on the outcomes achieved by voluntary organisations and support to help them to continuously improve their outcomes.*

Another, more recent, document directed at young people is a jointly published document by the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA). This publication entitled, Valuing Young People (Scottish Government/COSLA 2009) has at least three notable features. First, it is linked into the Governments National Performance Framework, namely National Outcome number 4, which views young people as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Second, it is framed around a national and international rights agenda for children through the United Nations



Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Third, what could be classed as a support service oriented approach by proposing partnership action to support successful transitions, help achieve their potential, enable them to make a positive contribution and to consult them along with adult stakeholders about what services should be provided. So, it could be held that the Government appears to be more interested in achieving predetermined national outcomes than encouraging self determination for local individuals and groups.

The governmental authorities promote an outcome-based practice (OBP) that is developed on good practice case studies, which have been externally judged and verified. OBP is a practice that aims to align the activities of public bodies and to focus on the impact, the improvements achieved.

From an analysis of the guidance, it is clear that this is a structural approach to integrate actions across public organisations, through community planning structures and in keeping with single outcome agreements of which sustained economic growth is the principal driver. It is a systematic approach that seeks to provide a culture of continuous improvement (Scottish Government 2009) although based on a national political agenda.

### **Analysing the potential impact of Performance Management on youth work**

It would be foolish to deny that youth work, like other community based practice, is subject to the current social policy discourse and operating systems which are fixated, inter alia, with enhancing accountability and proving continuous improvement. Performance management in modern public services is a key driver that is used to assess performance and judge value for money. Clearly, as noted earlier in this paper, youth workers are not against justifying their practice but the systems need to be appropriate and fit for purpose. In fact youth work practice will benefit most from producing quality information that provides an empowering and professional approach based on a research based culture of continuous improvement.

Performance management is purported to enable judgments to be made about the quality of a youth work service in terms of the three “E’s; economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Ford et al 2005). The provision of quality information is said to be important for youth work practice because it lets people know how they are doing by providing judgments set against their stated intentions. It helps to conduct

meaningful reviews and inform decisions as well as providing confidence in the importance of the work being undertaken.

As much as this is important work, there is a feeling in the CLD sector, including youth work, that an “outcome industry” has been created across the public sector and that it is more complex and confusing than is recognised. Further, it is highlighted that the same terms have different meanings within different operating frameworks, which are exacerbated by a lack of synergy in information systems across inspectorates and public sector partners (Scottish Government 2008).

In light of this complexity and lack of clarity, it may be helpful to provide some further explanation of key terms. **The Performance Information System** is a strategic framework developed by the organisation that should give the big picture with a full set of processes and measures for producing the information. If this is not in place then any data generated will have limited use.

**Performance Indicators** are devised and used to help to assess how well a service is performing against its stated objectives. **Milestones** are key parts of a plan that need be sequentially achieved so that the overall project can be completed within the agreed timescale. **Targets** are the expressed level of performance that the organisation is aiming to achieve and standards detail the minimum acceptable level of expected performance. Inputs are the resources that which makes the action happen. **Outputs** are the identifiable evidence, for example, 12 people in a class or 40 young people on a residential. **Outcomes** essentially equate with the impact, for example, improvement in social interactive skills or increased levels of participation and involvement. Readers will note, at this point, that these systems, processes and tools are the responsibility of the organisation to outline and prescribe. It is also the employing agency's responsibility to make sure that the framework is workable for the practitioner and is in keeping with their professional values and not the other way round.

It is a valid question, for youth workers, to ask why performance management was necessary outwith their individual practice. The answer to this would be based on a range of general management principles that articulate the importance of development planning, managing priorities, work monitoring, validating, both internal and external, assuring quality and informing self evaluation and staff development.

As part of the debate around the validity of OBP for youth work, it is relevant to ascertain any potential benefits of managing performance in this way. It could be argued that performance management systems can help to focus and direct priority work, involve youth workers more in planning and can assist practitioners to reflect on what they are doing. In addition, if a clear, consistent and workable process is outlined then it can help to establish a baseline of information, which can be built upon and subsequently helps workers to understand the impact they are making.

Again, an appropriate and inclusive performance management system could develop an agreed system of work and build support systems that measure the progress. It could also provide transparency in work allocation and in the recognition of achievements as well as engendering new ideas and confidence in the practice.

Such “management speak” presents the idea that the management of performance is a necessary, straightforward and linear process. However, the reality is somewhat different and requires a whole number of inter related processes to be in place for it to work effectively. Effective performance management can be adversely affected if there is no clear ‘strategic direction’, too many competing priorities and mixed messages about its value and use. Performance management can also be rendered ineffective when supervision is irregular or unfocused, motivation and validation is poor or its use and importance is not understood or inappropriate. Other barriers include individual work plans being unplugged from the strategic context and a distinct lack of practical and moral support for the youth worker.

To make the most of this current situation, when youth workers are practising within a performance management framework, it is important to view the inputs, outputs and outcomes not as separate entities but as an integrated relationship. The relationship between these three can be a valuable measure of performance and the process of interpretation and explanation are as important part of information management as the raw data itself. Therefore, explaining and validating the data is an important part of the youth workers contribution due to their orientations, values, knowledge and experience that can help to understand the meaning of the information and contribute to analysing the data over time.

Over and above this, it is important that there is a more holistic approach to performance management as there is a danger in focusing on outcomes alone. Outcomes taken on their own are not a reliable measure because these are normally longer term strategic aims which are achieved over the longer-term, often beyond

the life of a particular project. Also, there can often be a significant delay between outputs and outcomes in that the benefits of the intervention may be only evident years after the input. It can be difficult to directly attribute change or transformation to the specific inputs or outputs of a given organisation or initiative alone. It also does not answer the question of underfunded inputs.

In order to minimise the effects of this, the data needs to be managed rigorously and thoughtfully. This can be achieved by taking time to understand how the inputs and outputs lead to outcomes and use the evidence of the links to identify which ones that are most important to measure. Another tactic to ensure validity is to use outputs as proxies of outcomes and ensure that the accompanying narrative adds value by reflecting the particular local circumstances.

Most importantly youth workers should be confident and empowered by the information that they generate to demonstrate what they know and what they do. To do this successfully, they need to understand the ways in which their work contributes to the bigger picture. Further, youth workers should not rely on this one prescribed source of information and actively supplement their knowledge with recourse to other sources of reliable information based on suitable, rigorous research methodologies that find the learners' voice. For example, ethnography, action research, narrative and appreciative inquiry are research methodologies where the people involved are at the heart of the generative process. Such approaches enable the flexible presentation of data that both captures the learners experience and adds value to the development of youth work practice. In this way, a solid knowledge base will be built from systematic data collection, reflection and recording of experiences that will help to free the practice form over reliance on the dominant performance framework.

One of the questions that need to be considered in this debate is what is the intention of outcome-focused work and to establish whether this is an issue of performance capability, scrutiny and accountability?

If it is a performance issue, to the extent that the Government, and its agents, want to satisfy themselves that youth work is doing a good job, then it is duty bound to provide a suitable methodology that enables youth workers to demonstrate the necessary knowledge, skills and competence. It is currently debatable whether this should be a performance management system based on outcomes. Yet, we have

shown that in recent years the Scottish Government is promoting and supporting an outcome-focused practice for Community Learning and Development (CLD) as if it is universally acceptable and unproblematic. Recognition of some of the tensions that exist between policy and youth work practice may suggest otherwise.

## **Tensions between policy and Youth Work practice**

Traditionally youth workers have rightly guarded their relationships with young people by resisting and resenting external interference. Of course, youth work cannot walk away from its policy operating framework but it needs to take control of the data generated and ensure that its professional practice meets external requirements in a way that is appropriate and helpful.

As youth workers engage with young people in an “agenda free” manner, they know that sometimes there may be no immediately obvious outcomes but that valuable “connection” work has taken place. However, the results of these encounters and situations are difficult to explain which is, unhelpfully, not recognised by OBP and policy makers. One fear that many youth workers justifiably have is that when data is recorded it can be judged without reference to the particular context and circumstances. Also, that generated data is subsequently used for other purposes such as the basis on which decisions are made about what constitutes “successful” youth work that in turn informs the decisions about the type of youth work to be funded. As youth workers and policy makers are coming from different perspectives and have separate requirements, it is understandable that tensions will exist. In addition, the things which youth workers value and spend time developing, such as trust and respect, are hard to quantify in terms of input or outcome which may be a source of frustration within the auditor’s frame of reference. Similarly, putting a numerical value on ‘association’ or attempting to measure the depth of ‘dialogue’ is impossible and the relationship to ascertaining outcome cannot be judged with any certainty.

Further tensions are evident to the extent that although youth work has been expressed as a priority for successive governments it has never been given adequate levels of sustained investment, which maintains the tensions between youth work and policy initiatives (Spence 2004). In spite of the policy rhetoric, youth work remains hampered by continuous short term, under funding. The policies are based on a deficit understanding of the ‘youth’ concept and youth work is being driven into areas of work, which challenge the traditional principles and practices of youth work. A major problem continues to be that of youth workers trying to prioritise

which young people to work with on a limited budget. This is often overcome by bids to particular sources of funding but the sustainability of these projects is questionable and it potentially skews the practice, taking it in a multitude of directions to suit current policy demands.

In spite of youth workers efforts to “bend over backwards” to work with emerging social priorities, this tension with policy may have something to do with youth work attempting to hold on to that special relationship with young people and working with them on their terms in spite of policy directives that undermine this. This fundamental principle of putting young people first is not concomitant with the policy agenda of prescriptive outcomes that demands change and seeks guarantees. As Taylor (2008) cogently posits the Government in England has, “transformed Youth Work into an agency of behavioural modification {and} it 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.

Thus, these tensions help to demonstrate that the whole notion and purpose of a youth policy is a disputed idea with a considerable lack of ideological and operational consensus (Williamson 2008:66). In spite of this, directives and policies continue to be published which have increasingly influenced the intentions and approaches of youth work practice. Youth work practice is often required to work with issues and within structures, which it cannot control. This situation is exacerbated with a resource base which is wholly inadequate which leads to the contention that youth work maintains the status quo (Jeffs & Smith 1999) which hides “an implicit, unconscious politicised practice” that is on the side of the powerful (Taylor 2008:253). Thus, “cuddling up to government policies” and “playing the performance management game” may not have helped youth work to develop a practice that is credible and sustainable.

This research analysis takes place at a time when the trust in the integrity of Government is being questioned. Central ideas about working with young people such as participation and citizenship have been monopolised by untrustworthy politicians (Jeffs, 2005:8) which, are used to “oil the wheels of government by lessening irritating obstructions to what it wanted to achieve anyway (Davies 2008:141). There is a real need to explore what is happening in practice because youth work services are in a very fragile state and the vast majority of practice reports are aimed at justification for managers, funders and employers (Taylor 2008:255). What is required are genuine reflexive accounts of practice, based on reliable and

appropriate research methodologies which, provide honest and meaningful interpretations of the work and which expose the uncertainty, tensions and limitations placed on practice. Examples of such authentic accounts, which may be symptomatic of the decade, can be gleaned from such writings as Bradshaw (1981) and Ratcliffe & Taylor (1981).

## **Conclusion**

In summary, there is little point in carrying out and investing in performance management if youth workers do not see it as meaningful, if it does not add to their professional practice and if it does not enhance their ability to do their job effectively. It needs to be tailor made, flexible and add value so that it is viewed by all, as worth spending the time upon. The role of the youth worker is not primarily to demonstrate the effectiveness of youth work practice, nor to demonstrate compliance with a set of national outcomes but to meet the young person where she /he is at and work on identifying and setting their goals and aspirations through developing a positive, healthy relationship that goes where it goes.

Both the processes adopted and the data that it produces must satisfy practitioners' needs internally, to confirm and improve practice, and externally to verify and support its future direction for the benefit of the young people it serves. It must be in keeping with practice values by choosing an approach to data collection that keeps the knowledge in the hands of the learner. It would be helpful if politicians and policy makers recognised that youth work practice is different from other social practices. Youth work would benefit from being viewed as a "free practice" so that it can meet the needs of young people without having recourse to external, predetermined expectations or judgements. Youth work is different because it is about working with the latent and expressed needs of young people and not about policy and public organisations determining what young people ought to be doing or achieving.

This debate is as much about an issue of power and control as it is about the effectiveness of youth work practice. It is about who creates, owns and validates knowledge and youth workers need to find their own ways to understand and record their "practice of surprises". The production of youth work evidence is about questioning the unknown not slavishly 'tick the boxes' of the known, the familiar or the predetermined. It is about generating learning opportunities, reflecting on experience and challenging unequal circumstances through the flexible and innovative presentation of data.

There is a position in the youth work literature which posits that youth work has been at a cross roads for some time and is in search of renewal. Is this now the space and time wherein youth work can finally come of age, responding radically to democratic disillusionment in the name of young people or will it continue to do its master's bidding" (Taylor 2008: 253), through responding to the challenge to satisfy outcomes or by any other such means?

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# STATISTICS AND STORIES: GENERATING EVIDENCE OF YOUTH WORK EFFECTIVENESS

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## **Abstract**

*This paper describes an action research project, which sought to support Scottish Community Learning and Development (CL&D) workers (particularly grass roots workers) to generate evidence of the effectiveness of their interventions and to build confidence across the field in doing so. Whilst the project focused on CL&D workers in general, we seek here to focus on the experience of youth workers. Focus groups were held with 66 people from throughout Scotland to seek opinions on current and good practice in generating evidence. We identified a need for further continuing professional development (CPD) on statistics and stories, our phrase used to embrace quantitative and qualitative methodologies.*

## **Introduction**

This paper emanates from a project conceived by the Community Learning and Development Managers Scotland (CLDMS) network. It was funded by Education Scotland. This paper documents an action research process in which the views of Community Learning and Development (CL&D) practitioners at a range of levels within the professional field, concerning gathering the evidence of impact of professional practice, were explored. In Scotland, CL&D workers include youth workers, adult educators and community development workers. Whilst the nature of youth work appears to be self evident to many, it remains a contested field of activity, as there are many different views of its fundamental purpose. For the purposes of this paper, youth work is defined in terms of process and includes work with young people, which has distinctive features:

- Young people choose to be involved;
- Starting where young people are starting and then seeking to motivate and support them to go beyond these starting points into new experiences and learning;
- Developing trusting relationships with young people;
- Tipping balances of power and control in young people's favour;
- Working with the diversity of young people and for equity of responses to them.

(Derived from Batsleer and Davies, 2010)

Our research questions focused on the broad CL&D workforce and were very practical in character, focusing on Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in that they sought to explore evidence of and examples of current and good practice. Cooperrider and Whitney (1999, 10) describe AI as the ‘co-operative search for the best in people, the organizations and the world around them.’ They go on to say that it involves the art and practice of asking questions that stimulate a system’s potential to ‘heighten positive potential.’ AI is referred to as inquiry in that it seeks for knowledge and a theory of intentional collective action to help the normative vision and will of a community (Akdere, 2005). It distinguishes itself not in its criticality but in its deliberately affirmative assumptions about people organisations and relationships. AI is concerned with community, drawing on Freirean (1998) transitive critical consciousness, which involves individuals exploring, testing and revising their own thinking and interpretation of problems through a dialogical process (Barge, 2003). So our action research process was founded on the following appreciative questions:

- 1. How do CL&D workers gather evidence of CL&D effectiveness?**
- 2. Who gathers this evidence currently?**
- 3. What are examples of good practice of generating evidence?**
- 4. What happens to the evidence generated?**
- 5. How can we best support CL&D workers at all levels to generate evidence**

## **Methodology**

*“Action research aims to explore new ways of doing things, new ways of thinking, and new ways of relating to one another and to the world in the interest of finding those new ways that are more likely to be for the good of each person and for the good of humankind, and more likely to help us live sustainably.” (Kemmis, 2010, 425)*

Action research focuses on being useful, employs diverse methods and emphasizes collaboration (Stoecker, 2013). It focuses on the experience of participants as well as broader societal goals. Traditional standards of deciding methodology apply but there is the additional standard of creating research that will be used and determining methodologies that fit the culture of the population, as defined by them. Action research adds an element of social action that involves building socio-political awareness and facilitating social action, policy reform and other types of systemic or social change (Taylor et al, 2006). We were concerned in our action research project to use the experience of participants to inform our practice in developing an educational programme that would be uploaded onto the CLDMS website so that managers could use it to train their CLD staff.

Gregory et al (2011) discuss the importance of multi-dimensional collaboration to move findings into practice implementation. They argue that this is best managed through action research which demands inclusivity, focusing on what does and does not work in managing change; and avoids imposition of change, preferring shared involvement in planning and implementing change that is relevant to the context and population. Sharp (2005) argues that action research is a means of breaking down the division between producing and using evidence.

We chose to adopt an action research approach to this project as we wished to explore the understandings of practitioners in the field of the purposes, methods and intent of gathering evidence and to use this as the basis for the development of educational programmes to be used by CLDMS managers and their staff to train the workforce in gathering evidence of impact. We chose to use focus groups organised across as we intended that the data we would gather would explore our research questions in depth and seek contrasting views on the processes we were exploring. The action dimension of the research consisted of developing educational programmes informed by the views of our participants and communicating with CLD managers a series of recommendations designed to improve the effectiveness of gathering evidence of outcomes of CLD practice.

Groups were held in Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Fife to cover the broad Scottish geographical spread and events were also held, where this was requested, in Angus, and pilot educational programmes in Aberdeenshire. A total of 66 people attended these and we were pleased with the geographical spread of participants. These included participants from entry levels of the professional field – people who were relatively new to the profession – to a member of senior management of a CL&D service. The majority of our participants, however, as we had hoped, were grass roots practitioners rather than managers.

The focus groups were recorded and flipchart paper was used to record key points in the discussion. We produced summaries of the flipcharts and data was analysed using thematic and discourse analysis of the summary sheets and recordings. The focus groups were structured around 10 key questions that we identified on the basis of our own understandings of the significant features of gathering evidence. These questions were:

1.	Why does gathering evidence matter?
2.	What is evidence?
3.	Who gathers evidence?
4.	How do you go about gathering evidence?
5.	What is the best evidence you have gathered?
6.	Why was it the best?
7.	How did you get it?
8.	What happens to the evidence?
9.	What would be useful to people in gathering evidence?
10.	Where should tools and guidance be held?

Characteristically sessions lasted two and a half to three hours and involved around a dozen people in each. An activity was incorporated into the process using pictures to stimulate thinking about the ‘best’ piece of evidence participants had generated. Discussion in all the groups was vibrant, enthusiastic and focused on the questions we had posed. The questions proved to be a fruitful means of gathering the data we were seeking and hence have formed the basis, along with the picture activity, described later, of the educational programme we have devised as part of this action research process. The 10 questions often overlapped in terms of the discussion they generated but we felt that they covered considerable ground and were a useful resource.

One of the key dimensions of action research is that it has a learning purpose and we decided to benchmark knowledge of gathering evidence before we engaged in the focus groups. This was done with a simple and accessible grid with which participants were invited to indicate their confidence levels in terms of gathering evidence of impact. Our simple grid showed that the research process did indeed result in a gain in confidence and knowledge about the processes involved in gathering evidence, which once again has influenced the methods we chose to use in the development of the educational dimension of this project.

## Discussion

The data we secured was both in depth and comprehensive. We found that participants often needed to vent emotions at first about current issues of concern

linked to gathering evidence. This frequently focused on changes to CL&D services and concerns about job losses, particularly for sessional workers, including in particular youth workers. It was difficult for participants to discuss gathering evidence of effectiveness when their effectiveness was plainly in doubt under the threat of closing of services and redundancies. This was particularly the case in the Aberdeen focus group where participants were from the North of Scotland and there had been considerable changes in CL&D provision, particularly in Aberdeen and in Shetland. Gathering the evidence was frequently linked to job security and influencing the relevant decision makers, elected members and council senior officials and funders in the voluntary sector. This is not surprising as the 2010 Lifelong Learning Survey of the CL&D workforce found that there was a 25% (LLUK, 2010) reduction in the local authority workforce from the 2008 data. Respondents did, however, recognise the value of gathering evidence to influence decision makers and referred frequently to the difficulty there is in communicating what we do. Participants referred to the perception of school teachers that youth workers drink coffee and make friends with young people rather than being engaged in an educational process. Smith (2003, 79) argues that organising youth work around ‘concepts like outcome, targets, curriculum and issue’ means there is a danger of losing relationship as a defining feature of youth work practice through a reduction in the amount of time youth workers spend with young people (Harland & Morgan, 2006). This was a view reported by participants as being held by some of their colleagues who preferred to work with young people rather than generate ‘paper’ on outcomes.

Research by Harland and Morgan (2006) found that the majority of their respondents (n=42) felt that youth work could not and should not be measured. This was not the case for our respondents who felt that demonstrating the effectiveness of what they did was crucial to the future of the profession and accordingly of their potential participants. Two key markers of achievement in the Harland and Morgan research were levels of participation both in frequency and duration and the extent of relationship with young people. We found that our respondents valued evidence gathering of outcomes and also valued frequency and duration as well as the quality of relationships. There has been much criticism of ‘managerialism’ in youth work. It is expressed in a straightforward manner by Walker and Larson (2006) “It is one thing to identify the features of good programs or set quality standards for programs. It is often another matter to understand how to achieve these features or standards when facing the complex dilemmas of real-world practice.” (116) Walker and Larson express this complexity in terms of

‘competing objectives, values and warrants’ where situations can pit the developmental needs of young people, ethical concerns and administrative requirements against each other. Kruger (2005) describes youth work as a dance in which activity is choreographed in advance but then during the performance the dancers play off one another to the changing tempos of the music. *“Like modern dancers, competent workers study, practice, and develop the knowledge and skills that allow them to be in their experiences with youth in the most effective and responsive way. These workers sense, as well as know, when to intervene or not intervene, move closer or farther apart, raise or lower their voices, and increase or slow the pace.”* (22) Some argue that youth work outcomes can be somewhat intangible in the short term and workers are unsure about how to affirm the long-term impact of their interventions (Spence, 2004). Relationships Spence argues are important but a series of relationships with individuals and groups of young people does not sit easily with a requirement to record outcomes. This sensitivity and complexity of practice is the context in which we were exploring the ways in which CL&D workers including youth workers explore outcomes.

### **Evidence gathered at a range levels and by a range of organisations/ individuals**

Once again it is important to mention sample bias in that our participants had self selected but it was clear to us that all members of the CL&D profession in the voluntary sector and local authorities and at all levels are gathering evidence. People at grass roots level reported the need to keep track of the number of young people attending youth clubs, for example. Managers reported the need to keep track of the outcomes of educational programmes linked to performance indicators. The quality of this evidence was reported to be highly variable with some people producing robust and high quality evidence, whilst others were reported to be using anecdotal and overly simplistic evaluative materials with scant regard for the professional purposes of evidence gathering.

The ‘who’ gathers evidence question identified external bodies; partners; self; the individual’s organisation; and participants, such as young people. These dimensions were a common feature throughout the data collection. Gathering evidence for external bodies included gathering evidence for inspections; to show impact; typically for elected members or funding bodies. Partnership organisations were cited and professional colleagues. It was stated that many public services were much better at gathering evidence of the impact of youth and community interventions. Self was mentioned in the context of using evidence as a reflection resource, for

improving practice, for motivation and clarification of purpose of interventions. Respondents were inclusive and distinguished between the professions or job titles of evidence gatherers and their position within the organisation. So, a wide range of people were identified reflecting the broad compass of CL&D work. It included partners such as the police, NHS workers, social workers, voluntary organisations, schools and external bodies such as Education Scotland. It also included the CL&D workers' own organisations. The level of staff who can gather evidence included, managers, sessional and part time staff, CL&D practitioners including youth workers themselves, clerical staff and janitors/caretakers. Participants themselves were also identified as evidence gatherers in terms of artefacts such as portfolios. In fact, CL&D workers identified that everyone in the organisation and linked to it has a role to play in gathering evidence.

### **The reasons evidence is gathered**

The 'why' dimension of gathering evidence included, elements of the principles of CL&D – planning and management for both long and short-term goals. Staffing appraisals were mentioned and needs analysis. Affirmation of impact was considered to be important for both professionals and participants, including the importance of reporting back to the young people and the community. The external focus of evidence gathering was not the strongest motivator. We had anticipated that gathering evidence for HMIE would be a principle motivator. Rather evidence gathering was most strongly linked to professional development of the CL&D worker and improvement of professional practice. This implies that gathering evidence is embedded in the professional profile of our respondents for internal as well as the more formal external purposes.

### **Methodologies and methods of gathering evidence**

It is clear that youth workers based on our sample are highly motivated to gather evidence and use a wide variety of methods to generate data linked to impact. We found considerable creativity in the methods used, many of which were highly individual. One youth worker, for example, had designed a questionnaire in Scots to meet the particular needs of his participants. Another had used video evidence designed by young people to illustrate to councillors the impact of a youth empowerment programme. Our sample was biased to those predisposed to be interested in gathering evidence as they had chosen to attend our focus groups but we were still pleasantly surprised at the depth and range of methods used but it was clear from our respondents that this is not the case with all CL&D staff. Our respondents reported that there can be much frustration associated with 'number



crunching' when the outcomes of the work for the individual young person are much more important. There was agreement that 'statistics and stories' were the best means of gathering evidence in that numbers would convince local authority politicians of the importance of youth services in their constituency where the stories would capture the educational outcomes for individual young people.

Examples of good practice are highly idiosyncratic which accords with our view that a good CL&D professional is good at what s/he does because of who s/he is (McArdle: 2003). Evidence gathering methods were creative, wide-ranging and consistent with the value base and ethical standards of the CL&D profession. Youth workers were able to relate examples of significant change for participants as a result of the youth worker interventions. These were frequently told with high emotion on the part of the practitioner and frequently revolved around the significant and highly charged learning of an individual or group. For example, growth and change in behaviour from drug use to healthy habits. Respondents frequently distinguished between 'hard' and 'soft' indicators, where hard indicators are statistics and what was referred to as 'data.' Anecdotal evidence was not perceived as data, and we would agree with this but anecdotal evidence was a term used for the qualitative data that was frequently more than anecdote in its substance. The evidence cited by respondents included a wide range of artefacts such as CDs, photos, videos, reports, films, and achievement certificates. It also included methodologies such as case studies, narratives, reflective diaries, interviews, evaluations and peer reviews.

A number of important issues were raised about methods of gathering evidence as a corollary to discussions about exactly what evidence was. These issues included a discussion on the importance of triangulation inherent in the concept of Statistics and Stories. Fitness for purpose was emphasised in relation to methodology and this resulted in intelligent discussion around methodology linked to intentions and research questions. The setting of realistic goals was considered to be crucial to the gathering of good evidence, a position with which we would concur. There was also discussion of the need for evidence to be rigorous and 'challengeable.' The need for the 'voice' of participants to be heard in evidence was cited and considered to be an important methodological consideration. This foreshadows the need, mentioned earlier, for greater skills development in qualitative dimensions of evidence gathering, where rigour and validity are considered. Whilst research methods are important to evidence gathering, it is important to consider, in our opinion, criteria other than rigour and validity. We would add to these criteria the need for evidence to be empowering of the individuals and groups it represents – not necessarily

always positive but always empowering and inclusive; the need to be accessible to decision makers and the need to be attractive and of high quality to do justice to the intervention undertaken with participants and to the staff involved in the intervention.

### **How evidence is used**

The evidence is used in a wide range of contexts for a wide range of purposes. The most significant finding was the expressed need for a feedback loop where information concerning evidence passes both up the line and down the line. Youth workers may generate evidence of effectiveness but did not always receive affirmation or feedback on their achievements. We were surprised at the relatively limited focus from participants on Education Scotland (formerly HMIE) purposes for evidence gathering to inform inspection of youth work practice. It was pleasing to see evidence used for reflection, continuing professional development (CPD), appraisal and improvement of practice as well as for external accounting. Our respondents were willing reflective practitioners. This reflects positively on the Education Scotland message of preparing for improvement through self-evaluation and not preparing for inspection.

### **CPD Needs in Gathering the Evidence**

Feedback from focus group participants was that they found discussing gathering evidence of impact of CL&D to be developmental, motivating and confidence building as well as stretching horizons of the nature and quantity of methods of evidence gathering. Some practitioners at the grass roots level characteristically found evidence gathering to be a source of displacement from the core work of CL&D and a source of frustration. They preferred to be working with the young people rather than evidencing their impact. Our experience suggests that this is quite a common perspective for sessional and part-time staff in particular, who are less close to the sources of local and national outcomes and agreements. There is a need, we propose, for CPD in the methods of gathering Statistics and Stories for this group of staff in accessible and practical means of gathering evidence that enhances rather than distracts from the day to day work of the youth worker. Respondents reported that, whilst research methods was a subject taught in qualifying programmes for CL&D workers in higher education contexts, the link to evidence gathering had not necessarily been made apparent so these methods were not used and there was a need to revise these methods. There was an expressed need for educational refresher programmes in statistical methods to cover the quantitative dimension of evidence gathering. Anxiety about using statistics was reported, despite

the fact that statistics gathered rarely moved beyond simple counts and percentages of young people, and a sense that numbers did not adequately express the complexity of the work undertaken in CL&D.

A need was identified for further CPD in the Stories dimension of evidence gathering. It was felt that anecdote was insufficient and it would be useful for practitioners to know how to gather evidence that was rigorous, valid and credible in a qualitative domain. Qualitative methods were frequently used by youth workers who were well aware of the ways they could illustrate achievement through certification of Youth Achievement Awards or through artefacts created by young people and it would take little in our opinion to develop an understanding of rigour and validity. It would also be useful to expand qualitative approaches to use, for example, approaches such as ethnography, narrative inquiry and phenomenology. These are accessible methodologies and are appropriate we propose to the principles and value base of CL&D.

Mixed methods is the approach to evidence gathering that comes closest to the desired interface between Statistics and Stories. We are firmly of the view that a correlation of numerical data that identifies the extent and dimensions of an intervention is important to show development and progression of services but this can be combined with the qualitative data that shows the impact in terms of the complexity of the social, cultural and economic context of the intervention and the complexity of working with people. Mixed methods is a well developed method of triangulating evidence and there is a growing body of theory and practice linked to an appropriate methodology for bringing Statistics and Stories together for analytical purposes (e.g. Denscombe, 2008; Burke Johnson et al, 2007; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009)

Both methodologies and methods were discussed in some considerable detail, where methodology refers to an approach to evidence gathering including the thinking that goes behind this, whereas method refers to the practical strategy of evidence gathering. Methodologies included social reflection, peer reviews, use of community fora, youth forums and survey approaches. There was a strong emphasis on Logic Models particular to certain local authorities such as LEAP and Cognisofit. Methods used were abundant and included use of questionnaires, focus groups, use of templates for evaluation, generating statistics, Voxur, video diaries, photos, observations, and case studies. Methods that were used were much more qualitative than quantitative. Discussion focused on the importance despite logic models of unintended outcomes being recorded.

## **Perceptions of the ‘best’ evidence**

We used a picture activity to find out the best evidence participants had gathered. They were asked to select a picture from a wide range of images; an image that best represented their best evidence. This question was the most illuminating of the questions we asked as it identified what people valued in terms of their evidence. Best evidence fell into one of three categories. These categories were Qualities of the evidence, such as robustness, honesty, fitness for purpose, credibility, unquestionable, high quality, realism, authenticity and simplicity. The second category was Impact and this included effects such as boosting morale, fitting the audience, having a demonstrable impact, strengthening partnership, providing the opportunity to reflect, and influencing politicians. The third category we have termed Process and this included involving stakeholders, provided longitudinal tracking, matched with Performance indicators, provided sense of achievement and enjoyment, and strengthened partnership.

There were no patterns in the citation of best methods. The best methods were only consistent in that they had provided considerable pleasure to participants in the affirmation of good work done. The methods included some challenging measures such as peer review, Education Scotland interviews with young people, well designed questionnaires, learning celebrations and creative approaches of evidence gathering such as employing art work, the River of Knowledge activity and employability learning plans.

When asked in more detail how they got this ‘best’ evidence, methods were not the primary topic of conversation. Rather, standards of practice were discussed such as asking the right questions, starting the process early enough, knowing participants and what they will want to say, being creative and being open and honest.

The importance of emphasising to staff that evidence was used was expressed to counter fears that evidence gathering is just a formality and paperwork sits on a shelf. This also led to discussion of evaluating evidence at all levels of the organisation. The locus of participants in the HOW discussion raised ethical issues linked on the one hand to methodologies and the knowledge of ethical issues was surprisingly limited, although the CL&D value base would assist with ethical procedures being put in place such as confidentiality, anonymity and avoidance of harm to participants. This may however be an area for attention in any methodological training. Respondents were however cognisant of issues linked to the wellbeing of participants, such as avoiding asking participants for the same

success story over and over again. Balance and fairness by the users of evidence was emphasised. Respondents did not like the fact that ‘pet’ projects ‘get trotted out again and again’. It was felt that affirmation on the basis of good evidence of all successful projects was important.

### **The destination of evidence**

When asked what happens to the evidence, once again a balanced picture emerged of use at different levels within the organisation as well as use of evidence both within and outside of the local workplace. So, evidence was used for staff meetings, appraisals, self-evaluation and team building as well as influencing politicians, and feeding into single outcome agreements. It was recognised that evidence needs to have a feedback loop, going up the line and feedback on the evidence coming down the line. Factors such as giving people a boost and justifying activities and enhancing motivation support the need for this feedback loop on evidence.

When asked how gathering evidence could be supported four categories of support were cited. The first category is Resources. Examples, tools and templates were desired along with examples and banks of ‘good’ evidence. A term used to summarise the resources required was Tips ‘N Tricks. The second category is dealing with Feelings. This is an interesting category as it highlights once again the anxieties that can surround the evidence gathering process. The examples of responses to what would be useful included building confidence, emphasising the importance of evidence gathering, giving feedback and making evidence make a difference to the person who provides it. The third category is Legitimation. This category included responses such as: making time for evaluating, making time for reflection and providing a focus on the importance of evaluation. The fourth category is that well-worn category Other. Here lay responses that could not be put into categories but we do not want to lose them so they included: clarity from Education Scotland, the Scottish Government organisation, around exactly what is good practice; increased skills in evidence gathering; more access to networks such as COPAL and information on routes in the CLD Standards Council website to other sites such as that of Education Scotland.

### **Conclusions**

The processes involved in answering the 10 questions were confidence building as evidenced by our use of a benchmarking pro forma to assess confidence prior to and after the focus groups and pilot educational programmes. The action research resulted in a programme located on the CLDMS website to be used and cascaded

across local authority and voluntary sector organisations to further increase confidence. This programme is based on the 10 questions that we asked participants. We are of the opinion that this will translate to other related areas linked to youth work such as partners, library, leisure and NHS areas as representatives of these services participated in focus groups and found the content to be equally relevant.

We were particularly pleased to find that interest in gathering evidence focused not simply on Education Scotland inspection activities, though this was considered to be very important. Gathering evidence was considered to be relevant across a number of dimensions of professional practice. This shows that the importance of gathering evidence is embedded in professional practice, which was gratifying and to be applauded, we contend.

It is clear, however, that further CPD is required for workers at all levels in gathering evidence of statistics and stories. This is linked not only to skills levels but also to confidence in the gathering of robust and convincing evidence.

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## **SPEAKING EVIDENCE TO YOUTH WORK – AND VICE VERSA**

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The most acute challenge today is the need to substantiate youth work. Research can help in meeting this challenge but will have a distorting effect on the evidence base unless it is treated as one source of reliable knowledge amongst others. Distortion is most likely when particular forms of research, such as randomised control trials, are held up as the ‘gold standard’. Adherence to the standard means that only proven, evidence-based programmes should be funded. This position is extremely limited in terms of its ability to understand or to support the complex nature of youth work. An alternative is to draw appropriately from a range of sources to support judgement making. In this article we consider how such an evidence-informed approach can help workers, managers and policy makers to develop a robust and convincing case for youth work. Developing the evidence base will require a coordinated effort at worker, project, national and international levels. Regarding the latter, we will refer to a number of initiatives in the Irish context.

The context for youth work in many parts of the world is about accountability, results, measurement, and evaluation. This is by no means a new phenomenon in post-industrial societies in which political decisions and economic circumstances from the 1970’s onwards has lead to ever increasing demands on the part of government and other public bodies for service providers to demonstrate the value of the work. This point is made by Davies (2005: 6): ‘...where partners and commissioners of services rule, youth workers as never before are going to have to be clear, confident and articulate about just what this practice is and how it can make its distinctive (which of course is not the same as saying superior) contribution.’ At the heart of this imperative is the drive to secure effectiveness and efficiencies through market mechanisms such as competition, commissioning and contracting. These require ever greater levels of planning and specification of results in advance, as well as more stringent monitoring and reporting mechanisms. The irony is that instead of imbuing services with a more entrepreneurial spirit, they bring in their wake burdensome levels of oversight and bureaucracy (Bamber, 2000).



There are many aspects of the current accountability regime that deserve criticism, not least the counterproductive tendency to draw workers away from essential face-to-face contact as they spend more time bidding for funds and fulfilling the needs of paper-based systems. It is especially problematic when the burden falls on individual workers, often working for small agencies without the time, the expertise, the support or the resources to undertake such a task. It is worse still when accountability falls on individual sessions. Box 1 below provides one example of a report form currently being used in England (anonymous), in which the focus is on one session of 2 to 3 hours. The questions have to be completed following every single engagement with young people.

**Box 1: Report form for one session in youth work**

- What curriculum outcomes areas are you seeking to address (Every Child Matters – 5)?
- Were the planned objectives met?
- Describe the process
- Quality of youth work (7 point scale)
- Issues raised by young people?
- Actions for next session - responsibility?
- Attendance register (DoB/postcode/M-F/outcome achieved)
- New client registration forms
- Hate incident (nil return), sexual health intervention, drugs incident

**Learning Outcomes**

What do the young people know, understand, value or are able to do better, as a result of taking part in this youth work activity?

Such questions may be useful to promote professional learning and development after a considerable length of engagement, when relationships have had to time to develop between workers and young people. Suitably modified they may be useful for research or evaluation purposes, or even as a basis for external assessment in the form of inspection. They are too many and too complex to be meaningful in the timeframe proposed, and they lack a proper understanding of the youth work process, and of how people learn and develop.

These forms are but one manifestation of the now widespread requirement to show that every instance of practice is making an intended difference. During the current recession with its immense pressure on the public funding, upon which most forms of youth work depend, the lack of evidence of effectiveness is a slippery slope leading quite literally to oblivion. In England today, for example, the wholesale closures of local authority services is gathering pace (see, for example, the 2012 cuts of up to 28% reported by The Youth Association). It is not a problem unique to any one country, however, as there are threats to the sector around the world. In the United States the gains that have been made in Out of School Activities appear to be under attack from formal schooling, while in Australia the number of Higher Education institutions providing professional training is declining (see Fusco, and Bessant respectively, in Fusco, 2011).

Public funds in support of youth work have always been miniscule compared to statutory provision such as health, welfare and education. Even so, the need to defend the work has never been greater. A major challenge in this situation is the lack of a substantial evidence base. After hearing from expert witnesses from across the sector, the recent House of Commons Committee of Enquiry into Services for Young People in England concludes (2011, Para 30):

Despite the weight of individual testimonies, we experienced great difficulty in finding objective *evidence of the impact of services*, whether in the guise of thematic research studies by academics and independent bodies, or of evaluations of individual services. This problem plagued our investigations and was recognised by many in the youth sector itself as a historic and continuing problem (our emphasis).

From what we can tell, by ‘objective’ the committee means being able to detect intended outcomes while at the same time proving that these outcomes were caused by particular interventions. It is a ‘cause and effect’ model. Starting with this premise inevitably leads in the direction of evidence-based programmes, which are deemed to have predictable and repeatable results assuming strict fidelity to the programme manual. We use the term evidence-based programme refer to the implementation of specific programmes that have consistently been shown to produce positive results by independent research studies that have been conducted to a particular degree of scientific quality.

According to their own website, the Blueprints for Violence Prevention project, based at the Centre for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of

Colorado, identifies outstanding violence and drug prevention programmes that meet a high scientific standard of effectiveness. The aim is to provide a resource for governments, foundations, businesses, and other organizations trying to make informed judgements about their investments in violence and drug prevention programs. Having reviewed more than 900 such programmes, it is interesting to note that only 11 receive the seal of approval! A further 22 are deemed to be ‘promising’ in meeting some but not all of the criteria. The Promising Practices Network (PPN), again in the USA, assesses programmes in a similar way. They find 24 proven, with just over 50 in the promising category. The What Works Project at the University of Wisconsin provides a useful list of registries of evidence-based programs that have met specific criteria for effectiveness. The programmes cover a range of areas including substance abuse and violence prevention as well as the promotion of positive outcomes such as school success and emotional and social competence.

There is no doubt that evidence-based programmes have been rigorously researched, evaluated and tested; a fact that gives them high credibility in the eyes of funders and policy makers around the world regardless of their origin. One reading of the future, therefore, is that service providers will be required to adopt evidence-based programmes. In his recent report *Early Intervention The Next Steps*, the English MP Graham Allen states that: ‘One of my primary recommendations is that a greater proportion of any new public and private expenditure be spent on proven Early Intervention policies’ (2011: 67). Table 1 below presents a selection from the 19 evidence-based programmes listed by Allen in the report, (those with an asterisk can be found listed as proven on the PPN website):

**Table 1: Selection of evidence-based programmes in the Allen report**

Age group	Programme
0 - 2	Family Nurse Partnership*
1 - 3	Home Programme
0 - 12	Incredible years*
10 - 17	Functional Family Therapy*
12 - 17	Multi-systemic Therapy*

A common characteristic of evidence-based programmes is that they are premised on a deficit model, which means that they are targeted at particular individuals,

groups or populations that are considered to be at risk, in trouble or troublesome. Such programmes would appear to be at odds with youth work, which is more likely to regard social conditions as problematic rather than the young people who suffer from them. Having said this, the Communities That Care (CTC) programme is a wide-ranging, holistic, community-based programme, with many elements of bottom-up practices that would be recognised and accepted as appropriate by youth and community workers. Notwithstanding the merits of programmes such as CTC, we agree with the following point made by Schorr and Farrow (2011: ii):

The idea that our knowledge about what works should come primarily from evaluations of a relatively small number of flagship programmes does not take us far enough. These findings are the start of a knowledge base. The proven programmes that exist today, even when scaled up, cannot achieve the magnitude of impact needed to change outcomes for the most disadvantaged children, families, and neighbourhoods.

A fundamental problem is that the research paradigm upon which the programmes are judged to be proven privileges a particular kind of research. This is often referred to as the ‘gold standard’ that requires the use of control groups to detect differences between those who have and those who have not participated in the provision. The standard is associated with specific methodologies such as systematic reviews and randomised control trials (RCTs) as promoted, for example, by the Campbell Collaboration. According to its own website, the Collaboration is dedicated to helping people make well-informed decisions by preparing, maintaining and disseminating systematic reviews in education, crime and justice, and social welfare. The terms of the debate are often posed in terms of meeting or failing to meet the standard. Provision in this case stands or falls depending on its claim to be evidence-based.

Our view is not that youth work is deficient because it cannot meet this requirement but that the standard itself is not fit for our purposes. One major reason is that the dominant paradigm serves to limit the knowledge available (Schorr and Farrow, 2011: 1):

Leading public and philanthropic funders are wisely emphasizing using evidence to guide investments. However, we suggest that the boundaries, which the prevailing framework draws around acceptable evidence, can limit the knowledge base available to policy makers, program designers and evaluators. Prevailing approaches focus more on evidence that is generated from some sources than others and lack ways to assemble and use a complete knowledge base.

Biesta (2007) has also criticised the paradigm in terms of the extent to which educational practice can be compared to the practice of medicine, the field in which evidence-based practice was first developed. Moreover: ‘It is disappointing, to say the least that the whole discussion about evidence-based practice is focused on technical questions – questions about “what works” – while forgetting the need for critical inquiry into normative and political questions about what is educationally desirable’ (2007: 21). Against this he argues that, ‘research, policy, and practice is not restricted to technical questions, but can also be established through the ways in which research can provide different understandings of educational reality and different ways of imagining a possible future’ (ibid). For these reasons, in his view, it fails properly to understand the role of knowledge in professional practices that wish to be informed by the outcomes of research.

The standard can also be criticised for failing to give due regard to the range of credible social scientific research designs in measuring outcomes. Table 2 presents a number in addition to RCTs, with a brief explanation as to their value in terms of helping to understand and improve practice.

**Table 2: Common research designs used in measuring outcomes**

Study Design	Summary
<b>Case study (n=24)</b>	Rich, context specific detail about youth work; but limited evaluative design
<b>Single group, post test (n=11)</b>	Outcome data useful for improving individual youth work activities, but limited design
<b>Single group pre-post test (n=18)</b>	Outcome data useful for measuring impact; but difficult to ascertain if sole cause is youth work
<b>Controlled trials (n=16)</b>	Can compare outcomes between different types of youth work activities; useful evaluative design
<b>Randomised controlled trial (n=10)</b>	Similar to controlled trials with randomisation increasing the likelihood that observed effects are due to participation in youth work activities
<b>Time series (n=2)</b>	Can collect data over a long period of time without the need for a ‘control group’

(Dickson et al, 2012 forthcoming)

On a more pragmatic level, the kind of ‘gold standard’ research conducted by independent professional teams is hugely expensive and is simply not in the reach of most agencies or practitioners. At the same time the terms of such research often mean that there can be no deviation from the original plan for fear of undermining the integrity of the experiment. This is problematic for a practice that is essentially fluid and responsive. For these and other reasons, a credible alternative to the standard is needed, one which its own way is robust and rigorous while being realistic. In search of an alternative, the starting point is to accept that the evidence challenge poses three valid questions to youth work:

1. What does youth work do?
2. What difference does it make (outcomes)?
3. Can the outcomes be attributed to youth work interventions?

We take the view that there is a continuum of youth work practice running between ‘pure’ and ‘related’ forms. The former is undertaken by trained professionals and volunteers, and is open in the sense that it is available to any young person regardless of background. The outcomes of the work are not set in advance but develop through interaction with the young people. At the same time a range of ‘related’ services including health, education, and youth justice adopt youth work methods, such as social group work, while pursuing predetermined outcomes in line with particular policies and goals. The language of ‘pure’ and ‘related’ is best seen as relating to idealised types since it can be difficult to distinguish the two in the realities of practice.

The closer it comes to the pure, however, the easier it is to detect a distinctive youth work process that is based on a commitment to underpinning values such as equality, democracy and justice. It is about building relationships with young people while engaging them in purposeful activities tailored to their needs and interests. While not eschewing didactic approaches, it favours informal, experiential and collective, empowering learning methods. According to Davies (2005: 17), while elements may be shared with other professions, it is the combination of a number of explicit commitments that makes the process distinctive. These commitments involve:

- young people’s voluntary participation
- seeking to tip balances of power in their favour
- responding to their expectation that youth work will offer them relaxation and fun
- responding to their expectation that youth work will penetrate unstimulating environments and break cycles of boredom by offering new experiences and challenging activities

- seeing and responding to them simply as young people, as untouched as possible by pre-set labels
- working on and from their ‘territory’, at times defined literally but also as appropriate to include their interests, their current activities and styles and their emotional concerns
- respecting and working through their peer networks.

It is important to understand that the kind of youth work described above is concerned with personal **and** social development. In the words of Merton et al (Youth Affairs Unit, 2004: 5):

There is widespread consensus that youth work’s core purpose is the personal and social development of young people, provided through informal education. Linked to this, its purpose is increasingly framed in terms of its contribution to social inclusion [and] the development of social capital.

It is useful to think, therefore, of a spectrum of outcomes, with micro level changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours at one end, and macro level change in systems, institutions, and socio-economic conditions at the other. In the ‘middle’ there are meso level changes in practices, agencies, local communities, and local services. While change at the micro level is increasingly favoured by funders and policy makers, change at the meso level is not sufficiently appreciated in terms of its potential to demonstrate outcomes in youth work. One example of this could be seen at the Impacts and Outcomes Conference in May 2011 in London, organised by Children and Young People Now (CYPN). At this event there were many examples of changes in service provision, for example from Directors of social services, housing, and health services, as a result of the participation of young people in planning, decision-making and evaluation. This is important evidence of outcomes that are not confined to personal development. Moreover, it is credible, external evidence and research is not necessary to confirm this. Crucially, given the comments from the UK enquiry that we referred to earlier, it does not depend on stories from youth workers themselves.

Importantly, research in the sector is beginning to focus on outcomes. As a consequence, it becomes easier to explain the results of youth work to outside audiences. Table 3 below presents findings from research undertaken in Ireland by Devlin and Gunning (2009).

**Table 3: sample outcome statements**

<b>Outcome area</b>	<b>Sample outcome statements</b>
<b>Attitudes, beliefs</b>	Participants are more ready to take on new and more diverse experiences Enhanced confidence, self-esteem, awareness (personal and social) More open to people from diverse backgrounds
<b>Knowledge</b>	Increased knowledge about youth development milestones Increased knowledge of group dynamics More informed about health, sexuality, the law, careers and formal education
<b>Skills</b>	Enhanced capacity regarding: public speaking , problem solving, self-efficacy, making decisions, critical thinking Enhanced interpersonal abilities in relation to: teamwork, group work, communications Increased abilities in arts and creativity regarding: music, dance, drama, writing Increase in physical competence in relation to: sports, games, outdoor activities
<b>Behaviour</b>	More engagement in structured and constructive activities Increased involvement in decision-making Enhanced positive and pro-social behaviour and diminishing negative and anti-social behaviour

(adapted from Devlin and Gunning, 2009)

Similarly, there is increasing clarity about the concept of youth work itself. Although there are differences of view within the youth work community there is also a significant degree of consensus and overlap. The In Defence of Youth Work Campaign recently produced a book of well documented accounts of youth work in practice. From this it can be clearly seen that the work is value-led, dialogical, empowering and educative. The imperative now is to communicate this to other people outside of youth work, and in a language that they can understand. This is crucial, especially given the lack of independent corroboration of youth work from research.



It has to be acknowledged, however, that a number of significant factors make corroboration difficult given the very nature of youth work. For young people what is happening now is equally important if not more so than what might happen in future in terms of outcomes. This is one of the reasons why engagement with young people is inherently unpredictable - they may come on some occasions and not on others, which means that unpredictability is a condition of the work. It is also difficult to determine in advance what young people will gain from engagement (outcomes in another language), or to capture in precise ways the content of the learning itself. As everyone knows from a moment's reflection about this, the experience of learning is often far from simple or straightforward. People can think one thing and feel another, for example, and sometimes these can be directly contradictory. In any case, as a result of participating in a youth work activity a young person might develop (which is a stated overarching outcome of youth work) but feel confused and unsettled as old certainties are challenged. Currently the language of outcomes seldom speaks to this kind of deeper, nuanced and highly meaningful learning. It follows, therefore, that there needs to be much more sophisticated ways of understanding and capturing outcomes that does justice to the complexity of the youth work process.

At the July 2012 symposium on Outcomes in Youth Work and Related Provision hosted by the Irish Government's Department of Children and Youth Affairs in Dublin, Professor Dale Blyth from the University of Minnesota made the following useful distinctions between approaches to problem solving (see Centre for Effective Services in the references for information and materials from the symposium). If the problem is well defined, with few variables and known entities, then it is possible to use a recipe to address the problem. Even if it is complicated, it is still possible to develop equally complicated plans to address the problem. If it is complex, in other words if the situation is evolving and the people involved are pursuing their own agendas and reacting to interventions in unpredictable ways, then plans need to adapt and change accordingly. This latter is the approach most applicable to the youth work context. In this case, the research task is not to reduce to a minimum and isolate specific and repeatable factors in terms of cause and effect, but to show the iterative relationships between interacting factors in what are often fluid and unfolding situations. According to Blyth (2011) the task now is for the field to work out how it:

- Understands, values and integrates different forms of knowing
- Shifts from proving difference to improving the ways it makes a difference
- Shapes measurement pressures in ways that better align accountability rather than succumb to it.

We have argued so far that one of the major reasons youth work is under threat is because it has difficulties in meeting the terms of the evidence challenge. In accepting the need to meet the challenge, we have rejected the proposition that the only route to reliable evidence comes through meeting the ‘gold standard’ of research, with its reliance on randomised control trials. This is because the inherent complexity of youth work requires a higher level of sophistication. More pragmatically, the kind of research put forward as objective is expensive, is not user-friendly and is not up to the task of supporting practice development. Even if there is evidence, as Biesta (2007: 21) argues: ‘Research cannot supply rules for action but only with hypotheses for intelligent problem solving’. In other words, it will always be necessary to make judgements about its relevance to particular situations in any given context. As Zeldin (in Fusco, 2012: xii) states:

The task facing the policy maker or youth worker is to choose among those conceptualisations that have the strongest theoretical integrity, empirical support, practical utility, and which fit best with local conditions.

In our view, responding to Zeldin’s task requires an evidence-informed approach. This has been defined as: ‘An approach that helps people and organisations make well-informed decisions by putting the best available evidence at the heart of practice development and service delivery’ (Nutley, 2010). Acting in an evidence-informed way involves:

- Sifting information gleaned from research and other sources (our emphasis)
- Weighing reliability and relevance
- Synthesising and interpreting meaning
- Identifying actions applicable to the realities of practice
- Systematically applying objective criteria to inform planning and decision-making
- Remaining open-minded and willing to question accepted orthodoxies.

It is important to appreciate that such an approach is not confined to professional activity. We would concur with Schorr’s view that (2003: 10):

Communities will be able to act most effectively when they can combine local wisdom and their understanding of local circumstances with accumulated knowledge, drawn from research, theory, and practice, about what has worked elsewhere, what is working now, and what appears promising.

We now present four ways of promoting an evidence informed approach in youth work. The first is an evidence matrix, the second a literature review, the third a quality standards framework, and the fourth a resource that has been developed to support the framework.

Our starting point for the matrix is in line with Schorr and Farrow’s findings about what constitutes a useful evidence-base when dealing with complex problems and issues (2011: 3):

An evidence base that would allow us to substantially improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, families, and neighbourhoods would consist of:

- Findings from research and theory about what children need for optimal development
- Evidence from programmes that achieve results and provide children and families with what they need
- Implementation factors and community capacities, connections, and infrastructure to support communities in providing children and families with what they need
- Common factors of effective programs and strategies that achieve results
- Findings about the effects of complex interventions, based on multiple methods of evaluation as well as performance measurement using a results framework.

To martial the range of available sources to inform understandings of youth work and to support practice, we have developed an evidence matrix in which research is positioned as one important source amongst others (Table 4 below).

**Table 4: An evidence matrix in youth work**

Level	Research	Theory	Grey Literature	Practice Wisdom	Consultation	Monitoring and Evaluation	External assessment
Specific inter-vention							
Area of work							
Sector							

At the risk of over-simplification, the idea is that each of the categories offers a different but valuable source of knowledge. No single category would be paramount or conclusive but the evidence becomes stronger as the picture builds across the categories. In principle, the evidence for the work would be most convincing when there is consistency across them all (strong), and vice versa (medium to weak). The matrix could apply at the level of specific interventions, of particular approaches, for example, detached or club-based work, or even at a national level where there is some attempt to assess the evidence-base available to a sector. To illustrate the matrix we use the hypothetical case of a team of workers who are developing a new approach to their work.

In this scenario the workers would seek to make explicit and draw from accumulated practice wisdom – their own and the work of others. They would also try to locate independent research that is relevant to their area or topic, for instance in journals or through using search engines. What they are seeking to achieve would be informed by consultation with young people, who would help to establish the nature or extent of the need, issue or opportunity, and what is to be done in response. Their thinking might also be strengthened by appropriate theoretical sources such as learning theory or community development theory. If an evaluation of their work has been conducted, or if an external assessment has been made, for example, through a formal inspection, then this information is also available. They may also access the often web-based and easily accessible ‘grey literature’, which contains unpublished sources, government reports, materials and resources that offer valuable information about experience in different parts of the world, or about practices, strategies, tools and materials that have been found to be useful.

All of these sources have merit, but the more significant proposition is that the data can be triangulated, to borrow a term from research, in a way that builds a compelling case for the work. If research is proposing one thing, and this is confirmed by consultation, practice wisdom, and other sources, there is an extremely strong case for the work. Used in this way the matrix is a tool for putting the best available information at the heart of decision-making.

Our second example is a direct counter to the UK Government’s 2011 claim about the lack of objective evidence in youth work. Acting on behalf of the Irish Government’s Department of Children and Youth Affairs, the Centre for Effective Services commissioned the London based Institute of Education to conduct a systematically map the empirical research evidence on youth work practices on outcomes for young people. There were three questions:

- What is the contribution of youth work practices on outcomes for young people?
- Which youth work practices are associated with outcomes for young people?
- What methods are employed in assessing youth work practices?

The map (now close to completion at the time of writing) identifies 175 studies, which provide empirical research evidence on the impact of youth work on the lives of children and young people aged 10-24 years old, 93 of which are evaluations of impact. A wide range of designs have been used, with many collecting children and young people’s views about impact through interviews and focus groups as part of case study and single group design methodologies. Most reports are either case studies (32%) or cross sectional designs (15%), with both of these collecting data at one point in time (e.g. after participating in youth work activities). Very few studies collected data both before and after allocating participants to youth work and comparison programmes, either randomly (9%) or non-randomly (9%). In addition to primary studies, 33 non-systematic and three systematic reviews relevant to youth work were also identified.

The map is based on a way of working with young people (e.g. participative, dialogical and empowering), rather than a particular ‘type’ of youth work activity (e.g. involvement in community services, creative arts or specific leisure pursuits), so the search terms used reflected the ‘process’ and ‘approach’ taken rather than known activities that could be defined in advance. Table 5 below summarises the interim findings regarding aims, activities and outcomes in youth work.

**Table 5 – summary of interim findings from mapping the youth work literature**

Aims	Activities	Outcome areas
Personal and social development Social change Education and career Safety and well-being Contribution to society	Leisure and recreation Arts, drama and music Sports and physical activity Volunteer and service Social action Informal learning	Relationships with others Sense of self Health and well-being Values and beliefs Formal education and training
These aims → Pursued through these activities → Lead to these outcomes		

This map assists in supporting and substantiating many of the claims made by the sector, while making explicit the range and depth of existing research to those not familiar with youth work. It should also prove useful as a source and resource for those working in youth work and related practices. Moreover, owing to its international reach, albeit limited to the English language, it can be used as a starting point for a collective international effort to ensure the advancement of effective youth work. This map provides a framework to categorise and to coordinate existing and emerging research. In doing so it refutes the claim that there is no objective evidence of impact.

Going forward, it will be necessary to closely examine the quality of this evidence and to cross-check the findings with other sources and the emerging research literature. Recently, for example, the Young Foundation in the United Kingdom produced a framework of outcomes for young people. Although focused on individual change, as opposed to social change outcomes, it does draw attention to theory, it is based on credible research studies, and it provides a careful look at ways of measuring development in youth work. Although the systematic map is by no means a full representation of the richness and variety of youth work practice, it is nevertheless the first such account of the relevant international research to date. When finalised, the map will provide a valuable database of research that will be available to the field.

Our third example concerns the Irish National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (NQSFS). Prior to the development of the NQSFS there was little sustained or strategic approach to the assessment of youth work provision in Ireland. The main reason for this was that there was no inspectorate tasked with the evaluation of youth work services. Following the appointment of a National Assessor of Youth Work and the establishment of Youth Officer posts in Vocational Educational Committees (VECs), a developing infrastructure was put in place for the coordination and assessment of youth work provision. Having regard to these developments, it was decided not to establish a pattern of sporadic evaluations. Instead the rationale for the development of the NQSFS initiative was:

- to provide a support and development tool to youth work organisations providing services to children and young people
- to establish standards in the practice and provision of youth work
- to provide an enhanced evidence base for youth work
- to ensure resources are used effectively in the youth work sector
- to provide a basis for ‘whole organisational assessment’.

The framework is based on five core principals and two sets of standards, which are intended to be reflective of current youth work provision (see Table 6 below). It operates on a three-year cycle acting as a continuous process, consisting of internal and external assessment, planning and progress reporting. The self-assessment process is fundamental to the application of the NQSF. This takes place in Year 1, which enables the organisation to determine its current status based on the core principles and standards and to assess future progress against this baseline. The external assessment phase also takes place in Year 1 and serves to validate the self-assessment process. During this process, a review of documentary evidence is assessed, as well as more practical examples of quality through observations in practice. Focus groups with stakeholders also take place with the views of young people viewed as central to the process. Once the assessment phase is complete, a Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) is developed. This progression plan identifies areas for improvement, actions to address these and a timeframe for achievement. From this, a Progress Report is completed and submitted annually which indicates and comments on the advancement of the organisation along with any emerging issues and further actions to be achieved. The CIP and Progress Reports are completed annually, with a review and plan for the NQSF cycle devised in Year 3.

**Table 6: Core Principles and Standards – Irish Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work**

Core Principles	Standards
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Young person-centred: Recognising the rights of young people and holding as central their active and voluntary participation.</li> <li>2. Committed to ensuring and promoting the safety and well-being of young people.</li> <li>3. Educational and developmental.</li> <li>4. Committed to ensuring and promoting equality and inclusiveness in all its dealings with young people and adults.</li> <li>5. Dedicated to the provision of quality youth work and committed to continuous improvement.</li> </ol>	<p data-bbox="636 938 983 962">Youth Work Practice and Provision</p> <p data-bbox="636 1034 964 1090">Organisational Management and Development</p>

It is interesting to note that the primary function of the NQSF is to act as a support and development tool to assist youth work organisations to identify strengths and areas for development, and to benchmark this progress accordingly Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (2011:1). The procedures are rigorous, and combine elements of internal and external assessment against objective criteria. Peer review and stakeholder consultation are also important elements. The intention is that over time the NQSF will over time develop a body of knowledge concerning youth work practice in Ireland that is constructive for the participants and is reliable and credible to external audiences.

Our fourth example concerns a resource that has been designed to support youth work providers to incorporate evidence in fulfilment of the requirements of the NQSF (CES, 2012 – see link in the references). The resource is an online web portal that provides a ‘route map’ to quality based national and international resources and tools. These materials are categorised according to the NQSF’s five core principles and two sets of standards. Irish based resources were identified through a survey completed by national and local youth organisations. In addition, an online search was conducted to identify national and international materials and tools. Sources had to meet at least two of the following criteria to be included:

- Target audience is youth work volunteers, staff, and/or managers
- Relates directly to the core principles and/or standards of the NQSF
- Based on research on best practice and guidance
- Represents wide consensus based on consultation
- Developed by a government department, intermediary organisation, academic institution or national youth organisation
- Draws together key aspects of a variety of existing resources/standards
- Resource accompanies an internationally recognised assessment
- Electronically available

The breadth and the quality of the materials in this resource is testimony to a vibrant sector that is concerned to develop well-informed and appropriate practices in the service of young people. The materials come from a wide range of credible organisations, including government departments, universities, think tanks and development agencies. Many have an international profile and reputation, which is based on years of supporting or commissioning research, preparing or funding reports, the development of guidelines and manuals, or other such aids to practice. As such, the sources represent a valuable body of reliable knowledge that underpins and therefore gives credibility to youth work.



In conclusion, we accept that accountability is necessary, especially where public funds are concerned. It is more than a financial requirement, however, since accountability should be to a range of stakeholders with an interest in the well-being of young people, including young people themselves. In setting out our case, we have attempted to counter the claim that there is no objective evidence of impact in youth work. We have rejected the proposition that the only route to reliable evidence comes through meeting the ‘gold standard’ of research on the grounds that the inherent complexity of youth work requires a higher level of sophistication. Instead we have proposed a more nuanced evidence-informed approach, which is based on the integration of experience, judgement and expertise with the best available external evidence from systematic research. As instances of this approach we presented the evidence matrix, the systematic map of the literature on youth work and outcomes, the NQSF and the ‘route map’ of resources.

The proper goal of activity, like the NQSF in Ireland, is to improve rather than prove practice. If it is done rigorously, however, it may also help to substantiate the work at a time when the need to defend youth work has never been greater. Perhaps above all there is a need to remember that in comparison to major budget areas such as education, health, welfare, youth work attracts little support. In this case it is vital to maximise the impact of the resources to hand. Arguably, the best chance of achieving this is through fidelity to a well-defined, well understood and generally accepted youth work process.

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**Title:**            **The Emotional Intelligence Workbook (2012)**  
**Publisher:**     **Hodder Education**  
**Authors:**       **Jill Dann & Derek Dann**  
**Reviewer:**     **Jan Wilmington University of Strathclyde**  
**ISBN:**           **13:978-1-4441-7674-2**

This is a “teach yourself” book, which helps readers develop an understanding of emotional intelligence in practical situations. It contains information on what emotional intelligence means and how to use it to develop a higher level of emotional intelligence.

The work book explicitly guides the reader in becoming more self-aware develop self-control and increase their awareness and understanding of others. It also helps to engender a sense of increased social identity and the ability to manage emotions and relationships.

The chapters are laid out clearly with work sheets that can be used by youth workers to guide their own learning. In their practice, youth workers are required to draw on need different intelligences, Emotional Intelligence being an essential aspect of this. Drawing on aspects of Emotional Intelligence promotes an ability to quickly form relationships and keep channels of communication open while remaining authentic to themselves and practice values.

Emotional Intelligence is useful to youth work because youth workers need to know and understand not only what it is but how to apply it in practice especially when working in complex situations with and when managing difficult behaviours. Many young people benefit from increasing their ability to understand themselves and others through engaging in youth work activities. This engagement further promotes opportunities to express themselves through dialogue.

The worksheets could be adapted for use with young people to enhance their confidence and skills in ability to interact with others, both their world and the wider world around them.

Developing a higher level of emotional intelligence will help both youth workers and young people to critically reflect on attitudes and behaviours and enhance

interpersonal relationships. It will also help develop strategies and pathways within the practice for positive change.

As the book recognises, emotional intelligence helps to develop Resilience which although recognised when working within social work and early years, is arguably an under recognised aspect of youth work practice. Given that resilience promotes, “A resolute acceptance of reality, a sense of life that is meaningful and an exceptional ability to improvise” surely this is one of the core aspects of youth work practice.

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**Karen McArdle** is Director of Research and Knowledge Exchange at the University of Aberdeen. Her experience of CLD spans 30 years and her experience of youth work in Australia and Scotland focuses in particular on rural youth issues.

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## NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

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