Collecting and using youth development outcomes data to improve youth work practice

1. What is the research about?

This study examines the role of outcomes data in the ongoing development of youth workers and organizations. In recent years, the youth sector has faced increased pressure to measure activities and outputs in order to comply with the rigorous requirements of funding bodies. The authors describe "a time of tension for services, with the 'old school' of effective youth work (e.g. a strong emphasis on rapport and relationships over time) needing to embrace the 'new school' of accountability and scientific rigour" (p. 124).

The aim of this study was to work collaboratively with youth workers to develop an outcomes measurement framework that supports youth work practice, improves services to young people, and meets the needs of funding bodies.

2. Where did the research take place?

This research took place in the Nepean-Blue Mountains district of New South Wales, Australia. It was chosen because of its strong network of smaller, community-run organizations.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about youth workers.

4. How was the research done?

This is a case study of a pilot project that was a collaboration between Youth Action, the peak body for youth and youth services in New South Wales, and seven youth organizations in the Nepean-Blue Mountains district. The organizations were enlisted to develop and implement a practitioner-led shared outcomes framework that would apply across all of their programs. The researcher tested three research questions: Was the development of a shared outcomes framework possible? Would a framework provide enough useful data to facilitate the improvement of service provision to young people? What conditions were necessary for a practitioner-led system to satisfy the rigourous requirements of government contractors?

"Using the feedback of young people as a form of external data holds a worker (and supervisor) responsible for driving improvements in techniques, approaches, and outcomes beyond what is possible with internal worker observations" (p. 126).

5. What are the key findings?

Youth workers participating in the project were able to identify four headline outcome measures for the shared outcomes framework (p. 125):

a) Number and percentage of young people who feel more confident in a relevant skill. Services are expected to support young people to learn new skills, which benefit some aspect of their life.

b) Number and percentage of young people with improved positive connections. As part of building resilience, fostering positive connections is a common component of programs. These can include connections to family, friends, others in the community or other support services.

c) Number and percentage of young people who have reported a positive change in circumstance. As part of accessing services, it is important that there is some positive change in the lives of young people.

d) Number and percentage of young people who report that 'things are getting better'. The development of a general sense of optimism is key to improving the mental health and resilience of young people.

Organizations were then able to use the outcomes data to "[challenge] their ways of working, their focus, and even their beliefs in how change is created for young people" (p. 126).

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

This study shows that outcomes data can play an important role in improving youth work practice by acting as a source of external feedback. The author suggests that data should be seen "as an opportunity for reflection" (p. 127) – while it may affirm an organization's work, it can also challenge youth workers to change their practice in order to better serve the needs of young people.

Williamson, D. (2017). Collecting and using youth development outcomes data to improve youth work practice. *Queensland Review*, *24*(1), 123-128.

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