

This is Youth Impact
Essay Collection



The ins and outs of evidence: making sense of different perspectives on impact measurement

Dr Genevieve Maitland Hudson



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Impact and evidence in youth work have become large and looming concepts, particularly in the context of grant-making, commissioning and social investment. Like a ferry navigating an Icelandic fjord or a cruise ship at anchor in Venice harbour, they are large, unavoidable forces indicative of some sort of progress towards greater effectiveness and value for money. The present rhetoric certainly suggests that imagery. There is a forceful self-confidence in much of the impact movement, and a plucky defiance in resistance to it.

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Presented in these ways it becomes easy to take sides. Ranged with the evidence phalanx are those who use the cool language of science, who talk of difficult decisions, budget heads, experiments and results. Facing them are those more comfortable with an emotional vocabulary of experience, of pain, of

progress and of redemptive connection.

For the first group – which originated with those not directly involved in service delivery – the value of youth work must be demonstrated, it is pictured as outer; for the second – providers and practitioners – it is felt, and is pictured as inner.

These are not new distinctions, historically and philosophically speaking, but they are being played out in youth work in ways that are important at the moment. They are important because – in an entirely straightforward way – they affect young people, and those who support them.

I don't set out in this essay to reconcile these two groups. I take it for granted that these differences of perspective are deeply held, sincere, and constitutive in ways that matter and should not simply be dismissed or argued away. I will instead outline ways in which the argument could be refocused away from these opposing polarities.

Before going any further it is useful to sketch out the premises for the two poles of the debate.



The 'impact' argument goes something like this: there is knowledge to be had about young people aged between 12-24 (more or less); this knowledge is generalisable and biosocial (it has biological bases that interact with environmental factors); expanding our knowledge of this group through research and data collection using established academic methods will help us to do better at supporting them in order to improve their life chances in concrete and tangible ways.

The 'wisdom' group may broadly agree about the age group but may dispute the generalisability of evidence. It argues that outcomes are necessarily open and are defined by young people themselves. Doing better is a matter of reflection and dialogue with those we seek to help, and improvement in life chances may be neither concrete nor attributable to any particular 'intervention'. Where evidence is sought it is usually done through case studies.

These are self-evidently very different foundations for working with young people, and yet it is possible to sympathise with both. It is important to note, if only in passing, that power is not equally distributed between them; it seems for now as if the impact side of the argument is having the best of it. That contextual factor is worth remembering.

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It may well be the case that many youth work programmes have a blend of these approaches in both their staff and their intervention design, rather than a clear cut allegiance to one or the other. For that reason, rather than take sides, I would like to suggest some pragmatic ways in which the concerns of both can be taken seriously and addressed in the kinds of measurement that we implement in social programmes with young people.

In saying this I am assuming that measurement of some kind is both unavoidable and necessary. Measurement is a way of taking account of the work that we do and has, albeit in different ways, become an integral part of youth work. Measuring is, fundamentally, an ethical commitment. It is about

admitting that good intentions are not enough on their own. We should also routinely question how those intentions are played out in the support that we offer young people. Measurement is, and should be, here to stay. How it is best implemented, however, is still open to question. This is the area in which we might expect to see substantive changes in the short and medium term in the youth sector's tackling of evidence.

The frontline for the 'impact' grouping is likely to be the introduction of shared measurement that allows for greater comparability across programmes. Work may centre on:

- wider take up of validated tools across programmes;
- systematic measurement and review; and
- data sharing.

The emphasis here is likely to be on cross-programme approaches rather than in-programme bespoke measures.

While 'impact' proponents will be advocating for the introduction of shared measurement, the 'wisdom' group may be fighting to retain their own set of personalised insights. These are likely to focus on:

- particular rather than general journeys and trajectories;
- youth-led outcomes and goals; and
- story-telling and case studies.

So far, those in the sector who have sought to respond to the imperative from government and commissioners to provide evidence of effectiveness have largely, if not always wholly happily, taken on the advice of the 'impact' group. In some cases this has been entirely appropriate, but in others it has not.

The important question then becomes: is it possible to produce the kind of rigorous data that commissioners, the government and – increasingly – the general public expect, yet still retain the insight of the more biographical accounts of effective youth work?

I believe it is, but not with business as usual. In making this point, I am arguing against the idea that the impact agenda is purely political, and that no work is needed to improve measurement in the youth sector.

To illustrate why, we can take a short detour via the case studies produced by Kids Company before its closure.

Kids Company was remarkably good at following existing practice, but in ways that were often more extreme than any other similar charity. Its case studies are an example of that tendency. The charity's illustrations of need give us accounts of grinding poverty and a deeply distressing level of neglect and abuse¹. At the 'graduating' end of a Kids Company intervention, meanwhile, case studies gave us accounts of Oxbridge graduates, Hollywood actors and investment banking interns. We are left with a set of questions about the connections between the children described in the 'need' case studies, and those in the 'success' equivalents. Are these the same children? They need not be literally the same, but do they even share common features?

Presented with evidence of this kind, a Kids Company donor might have been forgiven for thinking that the charity was able to take in children who had the worst possible start in life, who experienced persistent and degrading treatment and suffered from deep-seated trauma, and support them into the norms of middle-class aspiration in a reliable and systematic way. This is not a true picture of the charity's work.

"The standard response of the 'impact' pole to the kind of problems raised by Kids Company's case studies is to introduce 'higher standards' of evidence."

Whether intentionally or not, Kids Company presented a misleading picture through its use of case studies². In doing so it was responding to a set of incentives that are all too familiar. That set of incentives encourages an emotional presentation of the need to which we must respond, and a laudatory presentation of graduation from our programmes of support. The case studies we present may in themselves be accurate and true depictions of young people's experiences; the ways in which they are connected, however, may be less linear. When

funding is tight it is tempting to usher out a star pupil rather than to present an average one, even less someone we seem persistently unable to help despite our best efforts.

The standard response of the 'impact' pole to the kind of problems raised by Kids Company's case studies is to introduce 'higher standards' of evidence. There might be a recommendation to randomise, for instance. Randomising, however, in the case of a relatively small youth programme, cannot guarantee that the case studies will be more representative of the general cohort, and so runs the risk of being no more informative. Random sampling typically works best across very large cohorts and through longitudinal studies. Doing this effectively in the youth sector does indeed require shared approaches, as the 'impact' pole recommends, and more resources than are readily available. These approaches are not well suited to the day to day measurement of social programmes.

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What is needed is a means of mediating between the cool generalisations of statistical methods that abstract away from the reality of young people's lives and provide useful, long-term generalised data, and the potential distortion that comes with individual story-telling. The first set of data tells us too little about lived experience, the second tells us too much to improve services for young people in a reflective way.

One way out of this dilemma is to use both approaches, and look across them to gain a better understanding of a programme. That is already relatively common. We present a series of quantitative outcomes measures and illustrate them with case studies. This is useful, but does not really connect the two methods; rather it presents them side by side.

1 For instance in Camila Batmanghelidjh's book 'Shattered Lives'

2 This is clear from other outlines of the charity's model, for instance its continued support of clients well into their thirties



"By thinking about youth work outcomes in prototypical terms we could make a space for generalisations that do not flatten out individual differences."

Instead, I want to outline another approach to framing evidence in youth work that may do a better job of bringing the insights of generalisation into contact with the lived reality that we see in case studies. This is a method that is almost certainly tacit in many programmes already, but which could usefully be made explicit. Following the work of Eleanor Rosch, it is usually referred to as 'prototype theory'.

Prototype theory offers a useful description of the way in which we understand concepts. It says that rather than carrying dictionary definitions of natural language terms in our heads, we have prototypical ideas of them.

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Prototypes are a central image of a kind of thing from which other examples radiate. We might, for example, have a prototypical idea of a bird, such as a robin. The robin would be our 'birdiest' candidate, and other birds would be taken to share family resemblances with it. An ostrich would still fall into our class of birds, but would be less 'birdy' than, say, a thrush.

Prototypes are a way of organising our knowledge about a class that is very different to a statistical average. Prototypical classes are not linear. Every bird may differ from the prototype bird in its own way and yet still be part of one classification. By thinking about youth work outcomes in prototypical terms we could make a space for generalisations that do not flatten out individual differences. We could also start to show the ways in which risk and protective factors cluster. This in turn would help us to flesh out some of the terminology that is so common in the sector,

and make more sense of it.

What does it mean, for instance, for a young person to 'reach their potential', a phrase so commonly used to define a programme's outcomes? We don't want to prescribe or fall into unhelpful determinism, but we do want to share a collective vision of a common set of features that equate to 'reached potential', even if only as a guide. Radial prototypes might help with this, particularly if they were shared, openly, across organisations and programmes.

It is possible, even probable, that many youth workers already have a prototypical understanding of the young people they support. In a discussion of mental health, the philosopher Ian Hacking remarks that: "prototypes, and radial classes, whether of birds or mental disorders, are not mere supplements to definitions. They are essential to comprehension."

In comprehending frontline work, it is natural to look for common features. It is important, however, to make these models explicit in order to be able to question the assumptions that come with them, to learn, and to improve our ways of working in the light of them. If we don't do that, we run the risk of relying on models that are never subjected to critical oversight. Prototypes dwindle into stereotypes.

Prototypical descriptions might provide the architecture for implementing a shared outcomes framework in a way that would be more widely acceptable and less dependent on narrow, and individually developed, idiosyncratic measures. We might have something a little like the 'symptom clusters' of psychiatric diagnostic manuals, and equally something like their casebooks which provide illustrative case studies in an agreed format. This example is by no means meant to suggest that youth work should be framed in mental health terms. Mental health is, however, an area in which systematic use has been made of descriptive categories rather than causal explanations³. In this it is markedly different to physiological health models, which are often presented as the approach to which we should aspire by the 'impact' group.

3 There are, of course, theories and research into the aetiology of mental health categories, but diagnostic manuals are modelled according to symptoms rather than causes.

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Causal explanations, though in many ways desirable, are never going to keep pace with the realities of frontline work. We need to be pragmatic in acknowledging that adolescence is a moving target. Not only do adolescents move, sometimes at high speed, but so does society. Systematic descriptive work needs to sit alongside causal research in order to target and improve services; prototypical models are one way of doing that work.

It is important to note that prototypes do not limit us to clusters of risk factors and deficits. We could equally well define prototypical asset models and clusters of protective factors. These would help us to get at something upon which both poles

would certainly agree: advantage just as much as disadvantage, is cumulative.

Radial prototypes and casebooks offer a way of systematising the practical wisdom of frontline workers, taking their concern with lived experience seriously, and aligning both wisdom and concern with statistical methods. This may offer a means of making shared measurement a genuinely shared commitment across the youth sector, drawing together the best features of the two groups so markedly at odds in the current debate.

This, and other approaches like it, are worth investigating further in pursuit of measures that support continual improvement of services to young people. In addition to exploring how to mediate between outcomes frameworks and frontline work, we need to continue to map the ways in which different research methods and measurement approaches are best used in the youth sector. This is work that has already begun, but which is not always straightforward to navigate.

This is where the Centre for Youth Impact has such an important role to play, in supporting the navigation of impact methodologies, their application and use, and in playing a crucial mediating role between description and causal explanation.



This is Youth Impact **Essay Collection**

This essay forms part of a larger collection, published by the Centre for Youth Impact. The collection was published to take stock of the evidence and impact debate in the youth sector, share different perspectives, and reflect on where the conversation could take us.



About the Centre for Youth Impact

The Centre for Youth Impact is a community of organisations working together to increase thinking and practice around impact measurement in work with young people.

We offer:

- A 'route in' to information, support and debate in relation to evidence and impact
- Events where you can collaborate with others and learn more about the impact agenda
- Resources to help improve impact measurement practice
- An inclusive platform promoting debate and discussion to advance both thinking and practice

Learn more or take part

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