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## **Non-formal youth development and its impact on young people's lives: Case study – Brathay Trust, UK**

*Karen Stuart\* and Lucy Maynard\*\**

### **Authors' information:**

\*Kaz Stuart Ltd, Threlkeld, CA12 4TL, United Kingdom.

\*\*Brathay Trust Research Hub, Brathay Hall, Ambleside, United Kingdom.

### **Contact authors' email addresses**

\*kaz@stuartleadership.co.uk

\*\*maynard@brathay.org.uk

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## **Non-formal youth development and its impact on young people's lives: Case study – Brathay Trust, UK**

*Karen Stuart\* and Lucy Maynard\*\**

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*Abstract:* Brathay Trust is a youth development charity in the UK, which has been working with young people for over 65 years. Brathay works in both community and residential youth development settings. This paper presents the current political context in which Brathay is situated in the UK. It then details how the Trust has developed a robust theoretical framework to underpin a non-formal youth development approach. This involved a process of practice based evidence to understand and underpin the delivery of Brathay's work, as well as the challenge of demonstrating impact using evidence based practice. The tensions between practice based evidence and evidence based practice are problematised and implications discussed.

*Keywords:* non-formal, youth development, impact, evidence

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\*Kaz Stuart Ltd, Threlkeld, CA12 4TL, United Kingdom. E-mail: kaz@stuartleadership.co.uk

\*\*Brathay Trust Research Hub, Brathay Hall, Ambleside, United Kingdom. E-mail: lucy.maynard@brathay.org.uk

## **Introduction**

In the last decade youth services in the UK have come under the government spotlight (Select Committee on Education, 2011). Youth services have experienced centralised targets, approaches that targeted young people at risk, surveillance of services, the need for accredited outcomes, a focus on delivery rather than relationships, individualisation, marketisation and bureaucracy (Jeffs & Smith, 2008, pp. 280-283). As a result of the 2010 UK Spending Review (HM Treasury, 2010), all ring fenced grants from the Department for Education were abolished, with the exception of the schools budget. This led to significant and disproportionate cuts to youth services, ranging from 20% to 100%. Year on year budgetary cuts continued to erode youth services, resulting in the closure of 350 youth centres from 2012 – 2014 (UNISON, 2014). The Select Committee on youth work concluded:

We accept that the outcomes of individual youth work relationships can be hard to quantify and the impact of encounters with young people may take time to become clear and be complex. In that context, it is hard to reject the basic tenet expounded by a range of youth service representatives and young people themselves, that ‘you know good youth work when you see it’. However, with a tight spending settlement and an increase in commissioning of youth services at a local level we also believe it is essential that publicly funded services are able to demonstrate what difference they make to young people (Select Committee on Education, 2011, paragraph 39).

For the surviving youth provision, there have been several implications of these changes. This paper provides a case study of one such provision called Brathay Trust. Brathay Trust is a UK youth development charity, which has been working with young people for over 65 years. Brathay works in both community and residential settings. The implications of the cuts and changes to Brathay were three fold: Firstly, we were operating in an ever tighter fiscal situation and had to be able to demonstrate outcomes to secure funding, where previously funders had accepted that our work was naturally beneficial. Secondly, in order to do that, we needed to develop evidence based practice to demonstrate impact. Thirdly, in order to demonstrate impact, we had to document what we did more clearly, with a

theory of change, a process that could, ironically, only be developed from practice based evidence (as opposed to evidence based practice).

### **Brathay's Context**

Being a young person today is a difficult task. Young people face unprecedented challenges, are bombarded by media images of the perfect body and yet are also seduced by junk food adverts that sell unhealthy eating habits (NEDA, 2014). They are pressurised to achieve and be successful in school, yet face poor job prospects (Sharp, 2013). They are expected to conform to society's norms on one level, remaining young and dependent, whilst having increased responsibilities and earlier sexualised behaviour is normalised (Papadopoulos, 2010). Financially stable young people are afforded a more gradual transition into adulthood, whilst those in poverty may be fast tracked into early employment and parenthood with little support (Roy et al., 2014). They are expected to individually navigate 'being adult' at an earlier and earlier age, with fewer positive role models (Sodha, 2004), and increasing pressure from social media (Cardwell, 2014). The consequences of poor transitions are high, including long term unemployment, low incomes, and poor mental and physical health (NCB, 2010).

Despite extensive evidence of the risk factors (identified above) and the protective factors that give young people resilience (see for example, the Centre for Mental Health, 2014), 'wicked' social and developmental issues endure (Kolko, 2012). The circumstances that some young people grow up in are more demanding and complex. For example, families are increasingly complex (Cancian et al., 2011); communities, in some areas, are no longer safe; childhood poverty remains high (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, 2013). Materialism can seem a distraction to everyday misery. Transitions are ever more fraught and complex with less certain outcomes (SKOPE, 2012) and young people are no longer just UK citizens, but also global citizens (Katz, 2004).

As a result of these challenging times, young people may present with a range of issues - symptoms of these circumstances. Perhaps the most prevalent and most profound is a lack of self-esteem and a lack of self-efficacy – they are not at ease with themselves and do not believe that they

can do anything to improve their lives. The indications show that young people are not thriving under these conditions:

- 66% of all young offenders have experienced family separation (Action for Children, 2010)
- 50% of all young offenders have been in care (Action for Children, 2010)
- 955,000 people aged 16-24 were not in education, employment or training in 2014 (Parliament, 2014)
- There are 5000 permanent exclusions per annum and 27000 fixed term exclusions (DfE, 2013a)
- 90% of young people are in debt by the age of 21 (Bazalgette, 2010)
- 60,000 young people are looked after by the state rather than their parents (DfE, 2013b)
- 80,000 children and young people suffer from depression (Young Minds, 2014)
- There are 75000 homeless young people in the UK (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013).

This challenging context and damning statistics set the scene for the work of Brathay. Brathay works with approximately 5000 young people a year, through its community and residential centres. Brathay's vision is of autonomous and successful young people flourishing in a just and sustainable world. The organisational values that support this approach include: respect for the individual; education as a transformative experience; the importance of relationship, and equality.

Brathay's work is localised, contextual and contingent on young people's assets, unique circumstances and needs (Davies, 1979; Sanderson et al, 2004; Young 2006; Ord, 2007). We ensure that programmes are engaging for some of the most disengaged young people, providing inclusive opportunities for all. We understand that some current youth provision such as 'after school clubs', 'Scouts and Guides', and 'the National Citizenship Service' may not appeal to the full diversity of young people, and as such, we develop programmes that are tailored to the assets and needs of the particular young people that we work with.

Brathay delivers youth development in a range of ways. Youth development is delivered in Brathay's urban community bases in Bradford, Sheffield and Wigan, as well as in its rural bases in the Lake District. Programmes may last between 2 days and 3 years. The programmes are

funded through a range of means. Some work is commissioned by organisations, Local Authorities and youth groups, whilst other work is funded by grant and trust funds. Some of this work is funded by 'Payment by Results' contracts. The young people who attend vary in terms of demographics, assets and needs. The activities that are delivered also vary, as Brathay has developed a heterogeneous activity base including: outdoor activities; creative activities; group and individual work. These programmes all focus on increasing the agency of young people to attain better outcomes for themselves. Brathay does not aim to mass produce young people who all think and behave in the same way. We do not have 'off the shelf' packages, but unique and bespoke programmes. Brathay's programmes fall into four broad areas:

1. *Improving learning, attainment and employability.* Work with young people and families to increase their attainment, attendance and engage them in life-long learning and employment. This contributes to higher levels of attainment, engagement in education and employment.
2. *Reducing offending and anti-social behaviour.* Work with young people and families to develop their pro-social behaviour, contributing to lower rates of antisocial behaviour and offending.
3. *Improved wellbeing (groups with discrete needs).* Work with young people and families with specific needs to increase their well-being. These groups of young people typically have specific needs in response to the situations in which they find themselves. They may be sexually exploited, self-harm, alcohol and substance misusers, young carers, looked after young people, etc.
4. *Social Action.* Work with young people and families to develop their engagement and criticality of communities and society. This participatory work involves young people shaping services, for example aspiring leaders and the National Citizenship Service.

The variety of programmes described above, and the complexity of the language used perhaps already alerts the reader to the need for a clear underpinning theoretical framework for Brathay's practice.

*Different learning positions*

Brathay describes its work as youth development. By using this language we are deliberately positioning ourselves as an organisation that delivers non-formal learning as opposed to formal or informal learning.

Non-formal learning is learning outside the formal school, vocational training or university system. Non-formal learning takes place through planned activities, in other words, activities that have goals and timelines. Because of the planning and intention, non-formal learning involves some form of facilitation. This does not equate to 'teaching' as learning is viewed as an active rather than a passive process. It tends to be short-term, voluntary, and have few, if any, prerequisites. Youth development is non-formal in that it utilises session plans and intended outcomes. A session watching a DVD on relationship abuse might, for example, have intended outcomes that include listening skills, discussion and increased awareness of appropriate relationships. The session plan might also detail how the facilitators will attempt to engage the young people to enable them to gain the outcomes.

This stands in contrast to informal learning. This is learning that is not organised or structured in terms of goals, time or instruction. There is no teaching or facilitation. So informal learning refers to the skills acquired unintentionally through life and work experience, and the skills are not acquired in a planned or deliberate manner. Much youth work is based on an informal learning approach. Informal learning also occurs in the context of the private and social lives of learners, but also includes the informal learning that occurs around educational activities, rather than as an intended aspect of a planned educational intervention. Young people hanging out in the park together may learn social skills, interaction, and may gain awareness of many issues or subjects from listening to each other's stories. Equally, these social norms can be learnt in a classroom setting whilst formally being taught geography. In turn, informal learning can occur in non-formal learning settings, for example, again learning about social norms can occur in discussions within the above relationship abuse context. Brathay does not focus on informal learning, as all our activities have clear plans demonstrating how outcomes will be achieved. However, of course, informal learning may occur.

Non-formal, informal and formal learning are further distinguished by the role of the educator and young people in the learning process. This links to the degree of power that young people have across the learning positions.



The most central difference between them is that formal education treats ‘the body of knowledge’ as the point of engagement between the teacher and students, whereas non-formal and informal education takes the development of the young people themselves and of their life-world as the point of engagement (Batsleer, 2008). The key differences between the learning positions are summarised in table 1. Because formal learning is pre-planned, it is predictable and relatively straightforward to monitor and measure through the attainment of targets at key stages, and eventually through qualifications (often called ‘hard’ outcomes).

*Table 1: The key differences between formal, non-formal and informal learning*

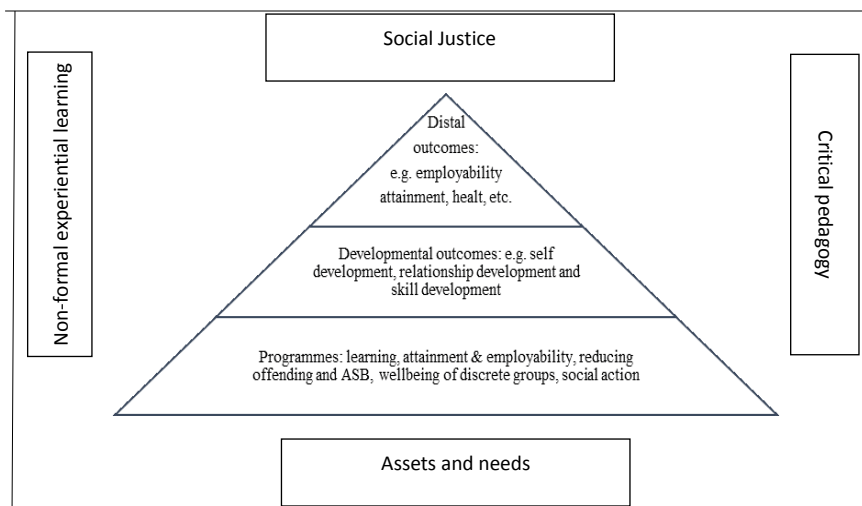
	<i>Formal Learning</i>	<i>Non-formal Learning</i>	<i>Informal Learning</i>
Role of the teacher / educator / facilitator	Teachers	Facilitators	No adult role
Role of the learner	Students	Young people	Self-directed learner
Type of planning	Set curriculum and lesson plans	Flexible session plans	No plans
Who has responsibility for planning	Teachers	Joint responsibility	Learner directed
Setting	In school or formal setting	Usually outside of school or formal setting	Multiple settings – can happen anywhere
Evidence of achievement	Attainment targets Qualifications	Outcome based	None

Non-formal learning is less predictable: although there are goals and timelines, these are flexible and outcomes are often more concerned with the social or personal development of the young person (often called ‘soft outcomes’). As a consequence planning, implementing, monitoring and ‘measuring’ outcomes of non-formal learning are complex. Informal learning is completely unpredictable and so even more difficult to monitor and measure. The political context in which Brathay’s non-formal learning was situated meant that this complexity needed to be addressed. There needed to be greater understanding of how this non-formal learning could demonstrate what difference it makes to young people. Before this impact could be measured, a greater understanding and clarity of practice was needed in order to know what to measure.

**Practice Framework: Practice based evidence**

We found ourselves in a place where we were so busy delivering what we thought to be good quality youth development programmes, that we hadn't stopped to consider what exactly made this good quality. What was it we were doing and what exactly was it achieving? This needed to be clarified and theorised, so as it could be understood, shared, developed and ultimately impact could be assessed. The answers to these questions and this need lay in practice and practitioners. We needed to unpack practice in order to better understand it and reconstruct it in a logical, coherent and robust theoretical framework for practice development and in order to evidence practice. Brathay, in partnership with University of Bedfordshire, gained funding from the Economic Social Research Council to create a conference that brought practitioners and academics from youth development related fields together to raise the value of practice based evidence. Case studies from practice were brought to the conference where academics and practitioners united to debate practice, with theory of change as a framework, and critical dialogue as a tool. This powerful approach to praxis was a catalyst for the development of a model of youth development (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Brathay's Model of Youth Development



There are three components to the Model of Youth Development: (a) an overarching value framework, (b) a practice model and (c) an outcomes framework.

a) The Value Framework: The value framework has four dimensions, assets and needs, critical pedagogy, social justice and non-formal experiential learning. These are all linked, in how the values inform practice, which lead to the attainment of proximal outcomes that contribute to the achievement of distal outcomes and social justice. The full model is shown in figure 1 and each of the three frameworks is explained in more detail below. Collectively this process of unpacking and analysing our practice enabled us to critique the implicit assumptions within practice. We were able to understand these within the context of wider literature, underpin practice with appropriate theory, ultimately leading to a more coherent and robust framework for practice. This led us to be able to confidently articulate how we work with young people to explore who they are and who they want to be.

#### *Assets and needs*

Brathay takes a strengths based approach, based on the founding principle of recognising young people's assets. We value and respect young people for who they are, and start where they are, with the assets that they already possess. As young people are all experiencing different lives in different contexts, they will develop different strengths or assets – qualities that are drivers for positive growth and change. This approach also recognises that the young people themselves are the solution, rather than passive victims. Young people's different contexts mean that they have been recruited or referred to programmes because they have differing needs. As such, all of our programmes commence with a needs assessment. An assets based approach has grown from community development into health and, more recently, social work (Gregory & Drakeford, 2006; Scottish Community Development Centre, 2013). However, a tension exists with this approach in an increasingly deficit led society, that speaks the language of 'hoodies', ASBO's (anti-social behaviour orders) and NEETs (not in education and training). This focuses on a lack of skills, knowledge or understanding to be located within individuals and becomes the focus of interventions. To work from assets, counter to the current deficit discourse, placed added pressure on Brathay to stand up to criticism

and demonstrate a robust theoretical framework for both practice and in order to evidence practice.

Understanding assets and needs can come from multiple perspectives, such as, young people, practitioners, and family members. This dialogue explores what young people and other professionals believe their current trajectory to be. This allows us to ascertain whether our work has helped to improve that trajectory or not. The trajectory is only ever an assumption based on personal expectations and known life-courses of similar young people with similar risk factors, rather than an established truth. However, they are useful intelligences from research that allow us to understand the populations that we work with (see for example, Lynch et al., 2003). We also identify what the young people would prefer their future to look like, i.e. their ideas of a more positive trajectory. Assessment of social context, assets, needs, current and desired trajectory, are therefore a critical core component of the model of youth development.

#### *Critical Pedagogy*

Fundamental to working from an assets based approach is providing time and space for developing self-awareness and critical consciousness. We found this to be the core of our practice. A critical pedagogical approach is “fundamentally committed to the development and enactment of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalised and economically disenfranchised students” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 9). This commitment calls on educators to question their practice and the ways in which it may, unconsciously, promote existing forms of oppression and to find new, liberating forms of education that serves all. Brathay’s practice model (discussed further below) is located within this critical pedagogical approach. This means that Brathay staff seek ways of working with young people that are anti-oppressive and that provide opportunities for empowerment.

#### *Experiential Learning*

Brathay take an experiential methodological approach. Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) does not solely focus on inputting knowledge and theory in young people’s heads, for which some traditional and didactic approaches to education have been criticised. Instead, it draws from young people’s own experiences, as well as from abstract concepts. These ways of grasping knowledge are transferred into learning through both reflection

and testing out new concepts in the world. This holistic approach to learning supports young people to personalise learning, to understand how they learn and become life-long learners. Young people should have ongoing opportunities to engage in different experiences in an upward virtuous spiral of experiential learning. This may grow from a position of relative personal self-interest or unawareness towards a position of political interest, community awareness and altruism. These trajectories will vary enormously for individuals and groups of young people. The exact balance of each of the segments of the approach will differ depending on the needs and assets of the young people.

### *Social Justice*

We support young people to have agency in their life, navigating their own futures as engaged and critically conscious individuals. It is these young people we believe, that will be 'successful', 'happy', and 'resilient' individuals who can participate fully in the world, as successful social agents. We believe that this leads to greater social justice as they are able to engage with and promote democracy and the pursuit of fairness, in the form of equity, diversity, inclusion and human rights. We aim for young people to make progression towards being socially active, increasingly contributing to a more socially just world.

b) The Practice Model: The practice model is embedded within the values framework, and particularly speaks to critical pedagogy. This involves a process of self-awareness, empowerment and agency.

Self-awareness involves having awareness of who you are, what your strengths and weaknesses are and how you impact on others. Critical consciousness relates to young people's ability to question the taken for granted, to see beyond the surface of a situation and critically evaluate what is happening and why. Critical consciousness is when young people are questioning the power structures of the world that they live in.

We achieve this through dialogue with young people at their own level, developing their understanding of themselves, the world around them and their place within it. Such an approach can reach young people who can often feel alienated (Martin, 2008), enabling them to make their own decisions about the issues that they face (Zucker et al., 2001; Campbell & MacPhail 2002; Diemer & Blustein, 2006). It can increase the likelihood that they will participate in political activities rather than accepting life as it

is (Diemer, 2011). There are a great number of tools that we use in practice to develop self-awareness. Many of these are ‘frames’ through which to examine or reflect on the self. These include models such as the learning styles (Honey & Mumford, 2000), drivers (Kahler, in Napper & Newton, 2000), and life positions (Harris, 1969). We also show young people models that help them to understand themselves, increasing self-awareness through increased understanding of neurophysiology, for example, the amygdala hijack (Peters, 2011) the iceberg model (Goodman, 2002) and the stress and demand model (Lazarus, 1999). The method for increasing self-awareness, awareness of others, and awareness of the world is dialogue (Fielding, 2001). We engage young people in dialogue about themselves and the wider world, using both personal experience and external stimuli (such as the media, film, or a high ropes course) as a discussion point.

### *Empowerment*

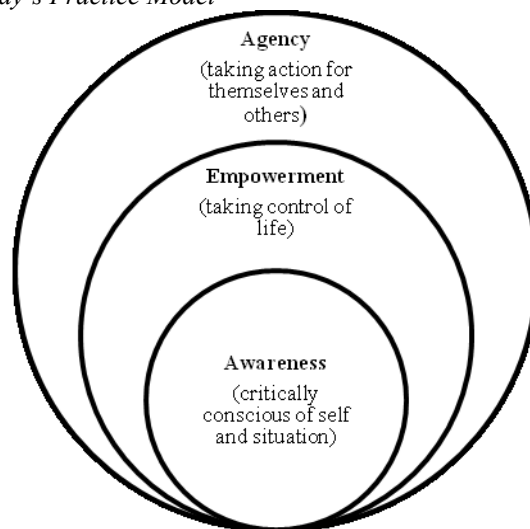
The use of experiential learning, challenge and dialogue leads to young people realising for themselves that they can be in charge of their own lives. Empowerment is the process by which people take their awareness of themselves and the world, develop a positive sense of their ability to act, and develop the skills necessary to act in the ways that they want to. The empowerment model (Maynard, 2011) shows how we can support young people in this process. Health initiatives have clearly shown that disempowerment leads to poor outcomes (ill health) and empowerment leads to positive outcomes (health) (Bernstein, 2013). This is claimed by some to be the most effective way to achieve youth development (Huebner, 1998). Grealish et al. (2013) suggests that simply listening to young people and offering them real life choices is fundamental in supporting empowerment. The empowerment model, choice theory (Glasser, 2010) and locus of control models guide this implicit and explicit work that we do with young people.

### *Agency*

As young people become empowered and develop a sense of self-efficacy they become effective agents. They develop the ability to be aware, to make decisions and to take intentional actions for themselves and others, rather than being hapless victims of life (Hill & Bessant, 1999; Côté, 2009; Aaltonen, 2013). The power matrix (Ledwith, 1997) and oppression model (Thompson, 1993) provide analytical frameworks for

developing awareness of the world. These tools, and the skills, awareness and beliefs engendered through the other areas of the model of youth development, support the agency of young people: their ability to be aware of themselves in any context, to be aware of what they want, to choose how to make that a reality, and to act on those decisions and awareness to attain their goals (Archer, 1995). The three areas of self-awareness, empowerment and agency, fit within critical pedagogy and we can therefore draw from this perspective to underpin a framework for practice. This is represented in figure 2.

Figure 2: Brathay's Practice Model



#### c) The Outcome Framework

The central triangle in figure 1 represents Brathay's outcomes framework. Brathay's model of youth development supports young people to achieve developmental outcomes which are proximal, intrinsic, and individual. Such outcomes have in the past been named 'soft' outcomes. However, we believe there is nothing 'soft' about these outcomes, they are very difficult to achieve, and lacking these skills can have a profound influence on more distal outcomes and on outcomes in later life. As such, more positive language was needed, such as developmental outcomes. These are the foundations of and, in turn contribute to, more distal,

extrinsic, societal outcomes (often known as ‘hard’ outcomes, such as attainment, employment and health). Brathay are often commissioned to deliver distal outcomes, but we remain resolute in our message to commissioners that these are only achieved through proximal outcomes and that these should be the focus of our work. This approach is underpinned by the Catalyst Outcomes Framework (McNeil et al., 2013). The framework promotes proximal outcomes as core to youth development. The framework supports our assumptions that achieving distal outcomes is contingent on achieving proximal outcomes (McNeil et al., 2013). Proximal outcomes belong to young people individually. Distal outcomes are those that affect society more widely such as participation and parenting (McNeil et al., 2013). We are also attentive to whether outcomes are intrinsic or extrinsic, and we focus on those that are most intrinsic. Intrinsic outcomes are those that are most valued by and relate to the young person such as happiness, self-esteem and confidence. Extrinsic outcomes are those that are valued by and measured by other people such as educational achievement (McNeil et al., 2013).

The research supporting the development of the framework analysed wider youth work practice and themed the outcomes that were being achieved into seven clusters (communication, confidence and agency, planning and problem solving, relationships and leadership, creativity, resilience and determination, and managing feelings). The framework affords a shared language for those working in youth development and related fields to be able to articulate what our practice contributes to and achieves.

The value framework, practice model and outcomes framework connect, creating the full Model of Youth Development shown in figure 1. This model is used as an induction tool for new staff, as well as training tool for professional development sessions to be structured around. Further, programmes are individually and collectively evaluated against this framework, which means that it is also a tool for reflective practice, monitoring outcomes and quality assurance.

### **Evaluation Context: Evidence Based Practice**

Brathay uses evaluation to enhance the youth development process, generate knowledge, and inform practice, products, programmes, and



strategy. Brathay's values encompass voluntary, participative, humanistic approaches. As such a qualitative social science approach was most congruent and thus was initially adopted. However, the UK climate does not currently value such an approach, and we soon had to develop an alternative approach to evaluation. Outcomes and impact are notoriously difficult to pin down and measure in non-formal learning, whether in the short, medium or long-term. This has been compounded by personal development outcomes being labelled and devalued as 'soft outcomes'. Distance travelled can also be difficult to measure if the end point is not certain at the outset. Further problems are encountered with attempts to measure personal development. There is no nationally or internationally agreed scale for such measurement; it is not a 'real' number such as height. Outcomes mean different things to different people; they are subjective rather than objective. Further, young people are complex; with many different factors affecting their day to day living. Therefore, how can we truly claim that a programme has led to the outcomes that they experience? Because of these difficulties, many youth workers reject the very notion of outcomes:

For youth workers the ideal is to affirm the positive aspects of young people's collective as well as individual identities, to enable them to better understand their present. From this perspective, they encourage constructive and reflective understanding in the here and now ('starting where the young people are at') in order to create futures which by definition cannot be pre-planned. Hence the dominant ethos in youth work is one of 'process' rather than 'outcome' (Spence, 2004, p. 262).

As non-formal learning has intended outcomes, flexible and responsive to needs and planned from knowledge of the young person, measurement is theoretically possible. Additionally, we felt, evaluation in a youth development context needed to contribute to the developmental process and benefit the young person, rather than solely for the benefit of the organisation.

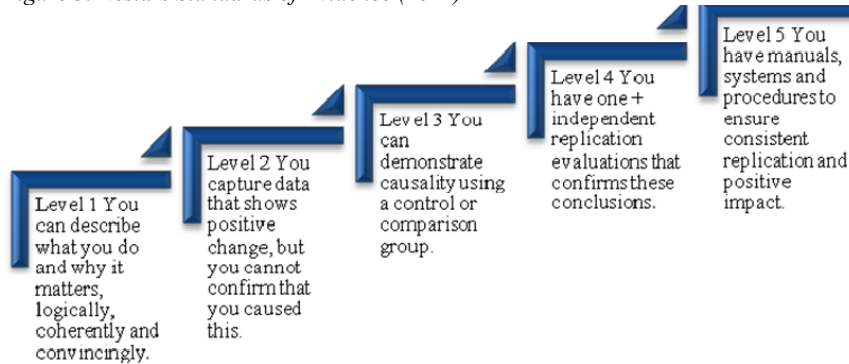
The difficulties that the youth sector faced in 'proving' its merit, increased after the rise of evidence based practice. Evidence based practice is an approach that has been well used in medicine for decades. It is a positivistic approach that tests whether a medical intervention has had a positive impact on the patient's outcomes. Its central assumption is that

truth is objective and observable, and that change is causal, i.e. administering drug A leads to change B. To establish this, the approach uses a pre-intervention test and a post-intervention test, variables that might also affect the change are controlled, and the intervention is compared to the change that happens to an identical group who are not having the intervention, called a random control group. This is a sound methodological approach for testing drugs. Most people want certainty about whether a drug will work or not, and it is possible to test this as biological variables can be controlled and causality of administration of a drug and patient outcome can be demonstrated. The problem lies in the over-extension of this approach into the social sciences. The UK government, eager to show a scientific basis for their decision making, pledged evidence based policy making (Cabinet Office, 1999). This sparked a raft of publications on how to create modern evidence based policy (Davies et al, 2000; Bullock et al, 2001; National Audit Office, 2001). Evidence based practice was then extended into interventions in education, social work and youth work. The government established five 'what works centres' to collate evidence based practice studies of impact. Soon after came the establishment of evidence based practice clearing houses such as the Education Endowment Foundation (2011) and Blueprints for youth development (2013). These publish the results of evidence based practice, showing which interventions achieve impact, and whether or not they are good value for money. As funders and commissioners were using the 'what works centres' and clearing houses as information hubs on which to make commissioning decisions, it became clear that you had to be included to be funded. Indeed a hierarchy of evidence was published by Nesta (2012) (Figure 3) that devalued qualitative approaches as only a one or two, and valued scientific evidence as three to five.

Strelitz (2013, p. 22) argues, the "hierarchy of evidence" used in health care is problematic in social care settings as social work outcomes are multiple and contested. If your programme did generate impact data using an evidence based approach, then the next steps demanded by the discipline were manualisation, and roll out with fidelity in order to demonstrate that the programme is replicable. This means creating a standard guide, a standard programme, and repeated delivery, which arguably is contradictory to the very essence of youth work. As Nutley et al., (2002, p. 2) state: "Such glib terms can obscure the sometimes limited role that

evidence can, does, or even should play”. The demand for evidence based practice has also overlooked key evaluations that were not evidence based.

Figure 3. Nesta's Standards of Evidence (2012)



One of the most comprehensive longitudinal evaluations of youth work projects in the UK reviewed the ‘Positive Futures’ programme over three years. This national evaluation also chose qualitative methods, stating:

One of the points of departure of this research from other elements of the existing monitoring and evaluation is our contention that meaningful evaluation of initiatives such as Positive Futures requires a methodological strategy that goes beyond quantitative analysis. It is only when the real benefits rather than spurious assumptions of quantitative research are utilised to support a qualitative approach that we can achieve an evaluation which communicates the social structures, processes, ‘feelings’ and context in which the participants find themselves, and in turn how they respond to such pressures (Crabbe, 2006, pp. 19-20).

Unsurprisingly, Brathay had issues with using evidence based practice. We believed that simplistic predetermined outcomes, pseudo-scientific measurement, and quantitative analysis would not show the real value of our work. We did not wish to work from assumptions however, and so embarked on a year of evidence based practice, or as close to it as we could manage.

### *Methodology*

Brathay embarked on a one year pilot project of using the Catalyst Outcomes Framework. The methodology involved as many of the 5000 young participants as possible in self-assessing their abilities. Rather than using a psychometric test we used self-assessment as we wanted the process to be useful, rather than intimidating, for the young people and because we wanted the assessment to be flexible to the outcomes of each programme. What this meant was that practitioners and young people would select five or six outcomes from the Catalyst Outcome Framework for their programme. They would discuss the outcomes and then the young people would assess themselves against each of the outcomes on a six point Likert scale. One outcome was consistent across all the programmes – increasing confidence – as this was found to be a common feature of all Brathay programmes. The young people would then repeat the self-assessment at the end of the programme. In this way we followed the classic pre-intervention, post-intervention model. In addition to this, we asked young people to give us more general feedback about programmes on ‘feedback forms’ and we created qualitative case studies profiling the changes that had occurred for some groups to capture the complexity of their lives and the changes that they had experienced. We were not able to create random control trials, as all the young people who came to Brathay experienced the programmes, we did not have any young people to control against. We also did little to control variables – we could not influence, for example, how long the young people slept, or what they ate, who they talked to, what music they listened to, who they interacted with, the quality of their parenting, or the depth of their support networks. There were too many to control. At the end of the year we collected all the data and analysed it using descriptive statistics.

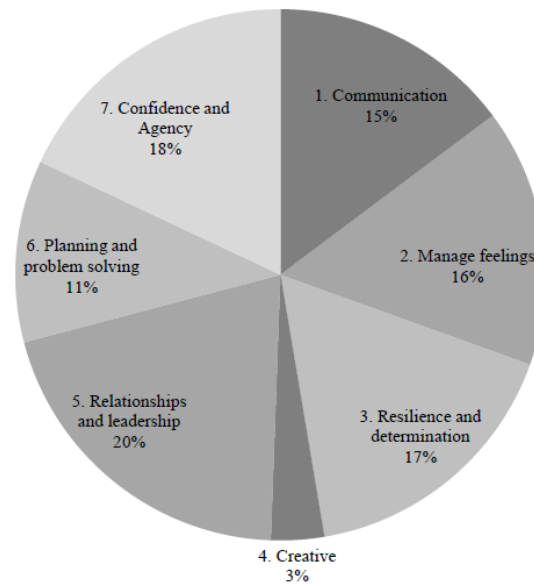
### *Findings*

a) What was delivered? The programme outcomes were mapped against the Catalyst Outcome Framework. Several outcomes were more frequent than others, for example listening and establishing positive relationships. This provided us with some understanding of the focus of the work that was delivered. These are shown in table 2. Due to the wide variation it was useful to summarise these outcomes into the clusters. The percentage use of each cluster is shown in figure 4.

*Table 2: The frequency of outcomes used on programmes 2013 – 14*

Catalyst outcome cluster	Contributing outcomes	Frequency
1. Communication	1.1 Listen	43
	1.2 Self-expression	20
	1.3 Presentation skills	1
2. Manage feelings	2.1 Reflection	19
	2.2 Self-aware	28
	2.3 Self-manage	10
	2.4 Emotional wellbeing	11
3. Resilience and determination	3.1 Self-discipline	2
	3.2 Self-manage	8
	3.3 Self-motivated	14
	3.4 Focus	11
	3.5 Aspirations	13
	3.6 Persistent	1
	3.7 Purpose	2
	3.8 Independent / autonomous	4
	3.9 Overcomes challenges	18
4. Creative	4.1 Imagine alternatives	4
	4.2 Open to new ideas	4
	4.3 Enterprising	3
	4.4 Innovative	3
5. Relationships and leadership	5.1 Empathy	4
	5.2 Interpret others behaviour	6
	5.3 Manage conflict	4
	5.4 Establish positive relationships	42
	5.5 Motivate others	11
	5.6 Negotiate	6
	5.7 Trust	12
	5.8 Secure attachment	3
6. Planning and problem solving	6.1 Manage resources	4
	6.2 Organisational skills	5
	6.3 Set and achieve goals	11
	6.4 Decision making	5
	6.5 Researching	3
	6.6 Analysing	3
	6.7 Critical thinking	3
	6.8 Evaluating risks	11
	6.9 Reliability	3
7. Confidence and Agency	7.1 Self-reliance	3
	7.2 Self-esteem	25
	7.3 Self-efficacy	4
	7.4 Confidence	23
	7.5 Locus of control	3
	7.6 Empowerment	9
	7.7 Critical consciousness	3
	7.8 Positive identity	8
	Total	433

Figure 4: The percentage use of each outcome cluster in programmes 2013 – 2014



With the exception of creativity, the range of variation between the clusters is relatively close – from 11 – 20%. We also mapped 2011 – 12 and 2012 – 13 outcomes onto the catalyst framework and found the range was between 2 and 31% variation. This showed we had potentially become better at using the breadth of outcomes more consistently.

The ability to map against a nationally recognised framework provides the opportunity to compare with other youth development organisations, as well as collectively gain an understanding of our joint practice.

b) What was the impact of what we delivered?

#### *Feedback Forms*

Feedback forms comprised of a simple two sided form that asked young people, through qualitative and quantitative questions about their enjoyment, learning, how they learned and what the impact of the learning was. Forms were completed at the end of a programme and so have no pre-test / post-test component to them. They are, in effect, the reactions of the young people on completion of the programmes.

Completing the evaluation forms was not compulsory, as that was not congruent with our values. A total of 1033 young people volunteered to complete the forms, comprising a 20% sample. These young people were 48% male and 52% female. The ages ranged from 11 to 25 with a mode value of 17 years of age.

The data showed that the median programme enjoyment score was 6 out of 6. This score was accounted for by a range of qualitative statements from the young people:

I enjoyed the program because it broke my negative self-beliefs also providing new positive self-beliefs [and] ambition to lead and trust others a lot more than I would previously, also not to judge people so fast (Female participant, age 25 on Aspiring Leaders Programme).

I enjoyed it because of the activities and the scenery and Jill and Jay - they're awesome! It took me away from my stress and worry at home (Male participant, age 20 on Princes Trust Programme).

I liked the programme because it made me share more things with my mum and I got to know her better (Female participant, age 15, on Mothers and Daughters Residential).

I found it really nice to spend time on my own with my daughter. The staff really encouraged meaningful conversations (Female participant, age unknown, on Mothers and daughters Residential).

The median score for learning was 6 out of 6, this was supported by the following qualitative statements:

Different people have different styles so you don't have to act like them. You are the only one who knows yourself better than anyone (Female participant, age 17, on Leaving Care Programme).

I have learnt my true friends and what they think about me and to be who I want to be/who I am (Male participant, age 18, on Leaving Care Programme).

To be more confident about myself and I can push myself to do more than I think (Male participant, age 16, on reducing offending programme).

I have learned a lot this week, mostly about myself and how much I can face things I never thought I could (Male participant, age 19, on Fathers and Sons residential).

That all fathers face conflict, but the time spent here was to learn to have better communications between sons/fathers (Male participant, age unknown, on Fathers and Sons residential).

We asked young people how we had helped them to learn, and asked them to select three of ten options. Young people learnt most from being helped to build their confidence and from being challenged (table 3).

*Table 3. The percentage of ways in which Brathay supports young people's learning 2013 - 2014*

What helped you to learn?	Percentage of answers
Helped me to build my confidence	18%
Challenging me	15%
Provided great activities	13%
Encouraged me	12%
Supported me	10%
Keeping me safe	10%
Talked to me	9%
Motivating me	7%
Helping me to stay calm	6%

All young people indicated that Brathay had helped them to learn in some way. This established attribution between the programme delivery and the learning achieved. It also seemed that this learning was perceived by the young people as transferrable rather than fixed and short term:

When I'm angry I won't put a window through with my fist, I can now calm down (Male participant, age 15 on Fathers and Sons residential).

Stop talking negative, and say 'I can do it' instead of 'I can't' (Female participant, age 18, on Princes Trust Programme).

I will ask more questions and be pro-active. Try not to just observe but to get involved more. Not be so quiet (Female participant, age 17, on Leaving Care Programme).

The biggest thing I have learned [is] to tell my son I LOVE YOU. This can be hard when conflict hits, but I must tell him (Male participant, age unknown, on fathers and Son's Residential).



The benefits of the stepping out of the day-to-day environment and how the challenges made us work better together. I will take my kids out of the regular environment more often. Spend set time each week as a family. Look in to doing an activity weekend 1 day together (Female participant, age unknown, on family work residential).

These feedback forms showed that the young people believed that they had enjoyed the programmes, they had learned, and this was due to their experience and the actions of the staff delivering the programmes. Because the forms capture reactions at the end of the programme, they are not considered to be 'evidence based practice', and so we supplemented them with visual 'outcome wheel forms' which were pre-intervention and post-intervention self-assessments.

#### *Pre-intervention and post-intervention self-assessments*

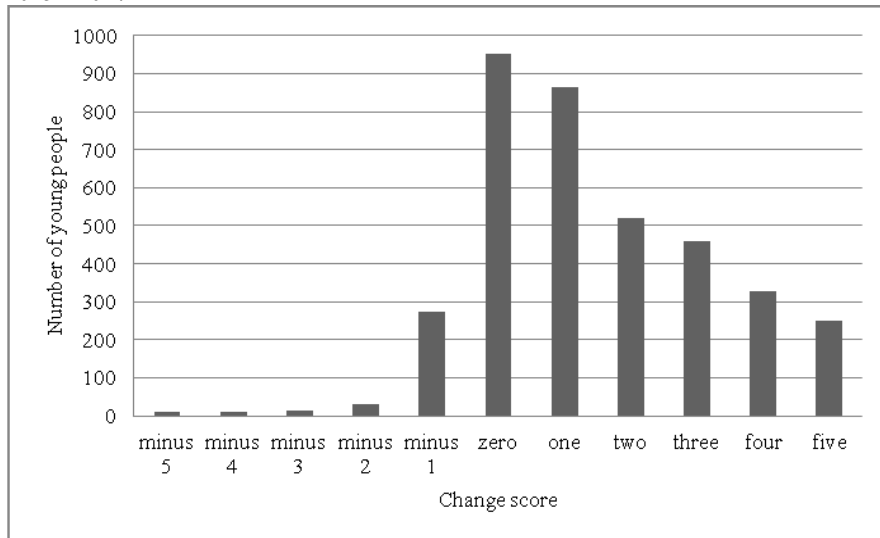
The self-assessment form situated the programme outcomes as the spokes of a wheel, with 1 – 5 measure on each spoke. The young people complete one form at the start of the programme indicating how skilled, knowledgeable or able they felt at each outcome. The process was repeated at the end of the programme.

Comparison of the pre and post scores yielded a positive change ranging from 1 – 5 point of movement, no change or a regressive score showing negative change. This generates a potential scale of movement from -5 to +5 distance travelled.

Outcome wheels were completed by 13% (n=667) of young people. When all the outcomes for all the young people were aggregated (n=2939), there was a distribution as shown in figure 6. The median change score (or distance travelled) for all outcomes for all young people in the year was zero. This score obviously stands in contrast to the median of 6 out of 6 for 'how much do you think that you have learnt' from the feedback forms. Young people cannot have learnt and not changed in learning. The data was therefore contradictory. Young people also identified the ways in which Brathay had helped them learn, which they would not have done if they had not learned anything as the self-assessment data alone shows.

This stood in direct contrast to the feedback forms which had shown evidence of learning. We investigated this phenomenon more closely within a three-year programme.

Figure 5: The frequency of distance travelled scores over all outcomes for all young people 2013 – 2014



Twelve programme participants were asked to score themselves at the beginning (pre) and end (post) of the second year of the programme. At the end of the year, the participants were also asked to score themselves retrospectively for what, in hindsight, they thought their ability was at the beginning of the year. This retrospective score was then compared to the pre score. This comparison showed a decrease in the retrospective score compared to the pre score for nine of the 12 (figure 7). On average the participants scored themselves 6.2 points lower in the retrospective score. Some participants scored themselves as much as 14 points lower in their retrospective score compared to their pre score.

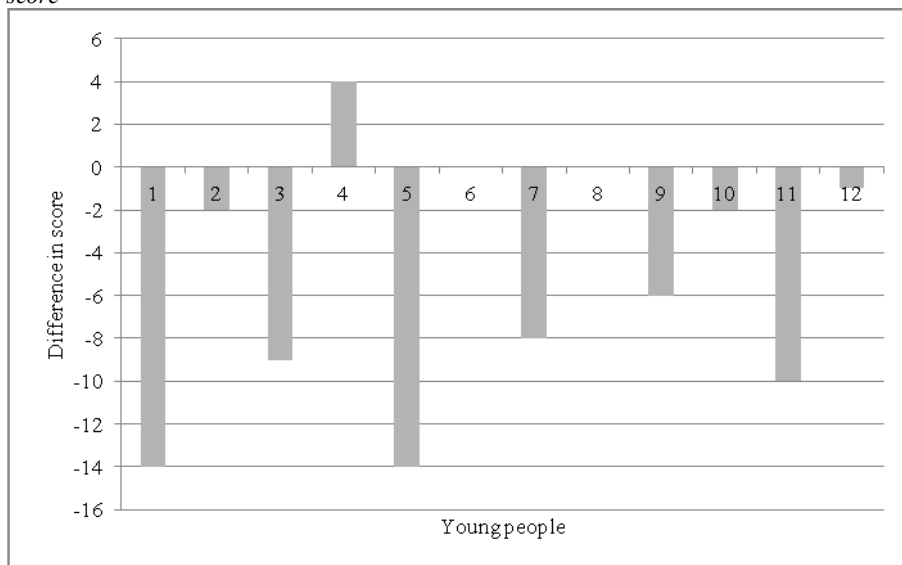
Qualitative data revealed how participants found that they had an unrealistic understanding of their ability in each outcome at the beginning of the year.

They all showed surprise at the difference of their retrospective score:

I'm surprised to see how much I have learned. I thought I knew a lot more at the beginning than I actually did (Female participant, age 25, on Aspiring Leaders Programme).

Comparing my actual score, it really surprised me how high I scored myself. My initial feelings do not equal reality! ...Bit cocky I was! (Female participant, age, 23, on Aspiring Leaders Programme).

Figure 6: Collective difference between actual start self-score and retrospective start self-score



This shows that the participant’s self-awareness had increased and adjusted their self-assessment to a more informed measure. This resulted in decreased scores. This caused us to question whether the pre-post intervention model was appropriate, particularly when we had established that the core of our practice was self-awareness (which essentially was thought to be causing the differences in start and retrospective scoring).

Evidence from this study showed in more detail how young people were clearly more self-aware, and how this was valuable learning in a process of change. However, this awareness was around questioning and re-considering their ability, rather than showing an improvement in it yet, i.e. they were critically conscious:

Same level. I don't think I question responsibilities as much as I should. I struggle to consider in practice, the various roles. I'm improving (Male participant, age 23, on Aspiring Leaders Programme).

This clearly shows learning, but this learning was negatively represented quantitatively. Further, some participants showed learning through attributing a lack of confidence to their low score:

Didn't really see myself contributing much. I'm slowly developing but more to do (Female participant, age 25, on Aspiring Leaders Programme).

In addition, through the programme, participants were able to see themselves in comparison to others, which afforded them realistic adjustment to their scoring of themselves:

Some people have really grown and I am not the 100% I thought previously (Female participant, age 21, on Aspiring Leaders Programme).

Our conclusion was that the self-assessment was methodologically flawed. Whilst it stands as a good example of an evidence based approach, we found it not fit for purpose with this approach to practice (and we would argue evidence based practice is not fit for all youth work contexts). Drawing from wider literature we better understood these findings from the following three reasons:

Firstly the young people may provide a high score on the initial self-assessment as they may anticipate that the youth workers want a high score (researcher pleasing), and/or, because they do not wish to portray themselves as lacking in skills to the new staff (and possibly group) that they have met, or because they lack confidence in their abilities.

Secondly, the young people may be 'unconsciously incompetent' according to Maslow's four stage learning theory (1943). This learning theory has learners progress from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence, unconscious competence and finally conscious competence. The implication is that when asked to rate themselves at 'communication', they believe that they are good at it. For example, at the end of the programme, when they have learned the nuances and complexities of communication they may then believe themselves to be average at it, giving a score lower to that which they provided at the start, because they did not understand the term at the point of the first self-assessment. The pre-

intervention score is an uninformed overestimation and the post-intervention score is an informed accurate estimation.

Thirdly, the young people may have 'cognitive dissonance'. This possibility arises from Cooper's (2007) research on attitude change which suggests that as people change, two opposing ideas may come into their mind at the same time, and the resulting conflict produces discomfort. As the new belief takes over, the conflict is resolved, and people are able to move on and make progress. The discomfort of thinking that you are good at/not good at communication could lead to misrepresentative scores.

We are not the only youth work organisation with this experience of self-assessments; Fairbridge (Knight, 2013) also found a similar phenomenon with their data.

The qualitative data and feedback forms provided evidence to show that young people learn and grow as a direct result of non-formal learning. This stands in contrast to the pre and post-intervention self-assessments that we trialled in order to move towards evidence based practice. We found these not methodologically fit for purpose. Young people are not 'lab rats', the variables in their lives cannot be controlled, and there are psychologically more complex processes at play than in a medical trial. We therefore need to challenge pre and post-intervention methods called for by government. That is not to say that scientific approaches are not applicable per se, but that non-formal educators need to make well-informed choices about which scientific approaches to use – balancing science and art. As such, we have implemented a post intervention measure of retrospective start scores and supported this by qualitative data to evidence the impact of our practice.

## **Conclusion**

The context of non-formal youth development in the UK has been shown to be fraught with difficulties due to a discourse of ineffectiveness a culture of managerialism and economic cuts. Yet at the same time, young people's lives have been illustrated to be more challenging and complex as demonstrated by a range of deprivations that young people are suffering.

Brathay is an organisation that situates itself in this space, delivering non-formal youth development to 11 – 25 year olds. Brathay developed a Model of Youth Development that has been fundamental to communicating what we do and ensuring that we deliver quality practice. This emerged

from practice based evidence – a process that seems to currently stand at odds evidence based practice. We have demonstrated that the process of practice based evidence is a key tool that can enable any youth development organisation to explicate its theoretical framework.

A further dimension to the current context of youth work in the UK is the dramatic and determined shift towards evidence based practice, comprised of pre and post intervention tests, validated assessments and random control trials. Brathay has long engaged with evaluation and has an extensive evidence base of its work from end of programme feedback forms and case studies. In the financial year 2013 – 14 Brathay experimented with pre and post intervention measures using self-assessments. The findings from the exercise showed that the young people had regressed in capabilities whilst on Brathay programmes. This stood in stark contrast to the end of programme feedback forms that showed significant gains in learning.

To explore this phenomenon further, an in depth study was carried out over a year on a single programme with 12 participants. The same phenomenon was present – the pre and post intervention measures demonstrated a regression in learning, whilst case study data demonstrated huge gains made by each individual.

We concluded therefore that it can be evidenced that non-formal youth development can have a profound impact on young people's lives, but that this impact may be misrepresented if youth services are forced to adopt narrow conceptions of evidence based practice. The integration of this scientific method in youth provision needs to be further investigated and developed as it is currently not fit for practice. Equipped with a robust Model of Youth Development and evidence from pre and post intervention measures, we felt confident to take this on in future research, in order to better understand how to stay true to our values. Continued exploration of the balance of practice based evidence and evidence based practice is needed to demonstrate the impact of our work.

These all point to the need for the sector to be skilled and confident, developing its own artful ways of applying science to impact evaluation, and defending its position from its value base. We now support other UK organisations to navigate the ground that we have through a peer support group, the Youth Work Evidence Group. We highly recommend that youth workers and educators in other countries take the initiative in such a manner and tell their governments what good evidence of youth work looks

like, rather than waiting to be told. And finally, above all, as critical pedagogues, we need to remain cognisant to the power structures that may shape our practice, and the oppression that may create for us as practitioners and for the young people we serve.

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