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Bridging the gap: Using Veerman and Van Yperen's (2007) framework to conceptualise and develop evidence informed practice in an Irish youth work organisation

Abstract

While there is considerable support among the policy, practice and academic communities for the idea that practice in youth work should be based on evidence, Veerman and Van Yperen (2007) highlight the fact that little practice in the area of youth care is actually evidence based due to the paucity of experimental studies in the field and the difficulties associated with evaluation of non-standardised interventions such as youth work. They propose a model consisting of levels of evidence, the aim of which is to 'bridge the gap between evidence based and evidence informed practice' (p.218). In order to address the dearth of examples in the international literature of how organisations have dealt with these complexities in practice, this article provides a case study of how a large Irish youth organisation, Foróige, has endeavoured to adopt an inclusive approach to evidence, working towards both evidence based and evidence informed practice. Drawing on Veerman and Van Yperen's (2007) framework, the case study shows that Foróige committed itself to gathering different types of evidence, including logic models and theoretical understandings at the foundation level and experimental design studies of key programmes at the advanced level. The case study focuses in detail on the intermediate level, whereby practitioners were trained to evaluate aspects of their own work, with a view to embedding evaluation and reflection in day to day practice. The process is described and key lessons emerging are discussed.

Introduction

Youth work is a type of non-formal education, consisting of educational and developmental activities and programmes that are different to but complementary to the formal education system. The principles of youth work emphasise voluntary participation, accessibility, participation, empowerment and equality (Furlong, 2013, Lalor et al, 2007). Youth work has been a central approach in responding to the needs of disadvantaged young people in society over recent decades. In common with all aspects of government funded policy provision, youth work has come under pressure to demonstrate evidence of its 'effectiveness' and to work in a way that is 'evidence based'. This requires organisations to undertake evaluation that focuses on outcomes from their work and to ensure that their practice is based on

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evidence from systematic outcome evaluations. These are complex issues, however, particularly as youth work interventions typically involve both structured (e.g. recreational, sporting and personal development programmes) and unstructured activities (e.g. street work, relationship building) which are often not suited to the formal evaluation processes required to demonstrate 'effectiveness'. By providing an illustrative case study of one youth work organisation's approach to evidence, we aim to contribute to the debate regarding the role of evidence in youth work and the approaches that can be taken by organisations to generate that evidence. Before the case study, we start with a brief review of the literature in relation to evidence based and evidence informed practice and how these concepts apply in a youth work context.

Evidence based practice, evidence informed practice and youth work

Evidence based practice (EBP) is an approach that emphasises placing evidence from research at the heart of practice development and implementation (Davies, 2004; Axford & Morpeth, 2013). The movement began in the field of health but has now extended into the fields of education, criminology and social work (Hammersley, 2005). Advocates of this approach (for example, Chalmers, 2003; Axford et al, 2005, Axford and Morpeth, 2013) argue that, while practitioners usually act with the best of intentions, their interventions sometimes have unwanted effects and may occasionally do more harm than good. They take the view that we need to remain uncertain about the effects of an intervention until reliable evidence is available showing that at least some beneficial effects outweigh the negative effects. There is a strong emphasis within the EBP movement on the use of RCT studies as a means of providing evidence regarding the impact of social interventions. While such studies are strong on causality, they are considered problematic for a range of epistemological, ontological and practical reasons (Jacobs, 2003; Plath, 2014). It is argued that the use of RCT methodologies in the social world is difficult due to the need to have an adequate sample size, address ethical concerns and to prevent demoralisation of the control group (Brady and O'Regan, 2009). The EBP movement is also criticised for its focus on outcomes or impact as measured by evaluation, while overlooking the process by which outcomes occurred and discounting practitioner knowledge and expertise (Nevo and Slonim Nevo, 2011). Hammersley (2005) is one of a vocal group of researchers who believe that the evidence-based approach is inherently flawed, arguing that there is a need for 'a spectrum of kinds of evidence that are not always commensurable and that necessarily depend on practical judgement if they are to be used wisely' (p.93). There is increased support for the

concept of realist evaluations, which measure outcomes, but also aim to understand the mechanisms and contexts that produce the outcomes (Pawson, 2013; Kazi, 2003). In response to the criticisms of evidence based practice, many have lent their support to the concept of evidence informed practice, which allows for research evidence to be considered as one part of the intervention, in conjunction with local circumstances and practitioner judgement (Nevo and Slonim Nevo, 2011; Arnd-Caddigan, 2011).

Veerman and van Yperen (2007) agree with the need for evidence-based practices but highlight that the vast majority of practice in youth care (psychosocial interventions for children and adolescents) is not underpinned by a strong evidence base. Few programmes have been subject to experimental studies due to the expense and complexity of this form of research design. Furthermore, they argue that, because youth care interventions are constantly adapted during the course of everyday practice to meet the needs of special cases, they do not have the consistency or standardisation needed for rigorous evaluation.

While 'youth work' differs from the 'youth care' referred to by Veerman and Van Yperen in that it consists primarily of community based non-formal education and developmental activities, rather than social work or psychological interventions, it is argued that many of the issues relating to evidence and evaluation are similar in both approaches to working with young people. In addition to the practical issues highlighted by Veerman and Van Yperen, debates regarding evaluation in youth work have questioned the 'goodness of fit' between EBP evaluation processes and the values and ethos of youth work. For example, Coburn (2011) highlights how youth work values are rooted in the work of Freire, aiming to develop a critical consciousness and focusing on the possibilities for transformation in the lives of young people. In this context, the objectivist 'top down' criteria used in quantitative evaluation could be seen as a form of surveillance, aiming to maintain rather than challenge the status quo. France (2008) argues that the neo-positivist approach reduces complex aspects of personal and social development to 'risk factors' that are amenable to measurement, which is contrary to dialogue and empowerment centred approach of traditional youth work (Coburn, 2011). Likewise, it is argued that it is not always possible to identify tangible, measurable outcomes in youth work within a defined time period and that quantitative evaluation approaches are incapable of illustrating the 'complexities and imponderables' that characterise this type of work (Spence and Wood, 2011; Davies, 2011; Cooper, 2011). There are those who believe that the impact of youth work cannot be measured and that policy

makers must accept that informal education is important and refrain from seeking out a body of evidence regarding its value (Jeffs, 2011).

Others are of the view that youth work, like other sectors, must be accountable for the funding it receives, which requires attention to the gathering of valid data over time and the use of evidence in practice. McKee (2011) argues that youth work practice must be accompanied by a data development strategy that is systematic and thoughtful. While Spence & Wood (2011) are of the view that there are 'good reasons to be suspicious of evaluations and the evidence trail' (p.12), they believe that this issue is not best addressed by avoiding research altogether. Instead, they argue for an 'enlightened' approach to research (p.9), which would involve an open-ended process of questioning and discovery, using methods which are appropriate to the situation as well as the need to gather data systematically. They argue that it is the responsibility of all academics and practitioners involved in working with young people to incorporate research into their everyday practices in these terms. Understood in this way, they see research as integral to everyday practice and not a separate or standalone activity. They argue that in order to deliver good youth work practice, one must listen to young people and engage them in an analysis of how they experience and interpret the worlds they occupy (p.11). Cooper (2011) and Hansen and Crawford (2011) highlight how youth workers can engage in purposeful evaluation activity that results in practice learning and development, an approach that is congruent with the ethos and values of youth work.

Cooper (2011) makes the point that, while evaluation can be undertaken for the purposes of accountability, programme development and practice improvement, our understanding of evaluation has been 'corrupted by an exclusive focus on accountability, losing its ability to support programme development or generate knowledge and conversely this has had a detrimental effect on practice' (p.56). She argues that youth workers disengagement with the process of evaluation is of concern as it means they may overlook opportunities for generating practice knowledge and improvement. She argues that participatory forms of evaluation can offer resistance to the dominant discourse of evaluation as a technology of power.

While seeing the value of experimental design studies but acknowledging the complexities associated with such studies in youth care, Veerman and Van Yperen (2007) advocate that a 'bottom-up' approach to the evaluation of youth care initiatives be taken, whereby youth

interventions in day-to-day practice are taken as a starting point. They refer to this approach as 'practice-driven evaluation' (p.214) and believe that practitioners should be involved in the research and link it with their own interests, for example, in setting clear intervention goals, using standardised instruments to monitor the course and outcomes of their interventions and building a sound theoretical rationale. They believe that the feedback of empirical data can help practitioners to improve their day-to-day practice. Furthermore, Veerman and Van Yperen provide an inclusive framework for conceptualising how practitioner led forms of evaluation and more complex types of evidence, such as from experimental studies can play a role in enhancing the evidence base of youth work.

Case Study

The case-study starts with a brief profile of Foróige, the organisation in focus. We then describe how Foróige's approach to evaluation evolved over time, commencing with a search for causal evidence of impact and the development of an outcomes focused approach, before moving to embed practice-driven evaluation across the organisation.

Methods

The authors are employed by a University that was commissioned to undertake a series of evaluation studies by Foróige and subsequently to provide evaluation training to staff. The data used for the case study is drawn primarily from field notes and evaluation forms regarding an initial 'pilot' evaluation training session held in November 2010 and follow up review session held in April 2011. A total of 27 people took part in the pilot evaluation training, all of whom were employed by Foróige as project officers and senior project officers in youth justice projects, youth cafes and youth development projects in the region. The Foróige regional manager also took part in the sessions and played a key role in ensuring that staff were supported to undertaken evaluation following the initial training. The key themes that emerged from the data related to the process (what was done and with whom), the benefits and challenges associated with practitioner-led evaluation and plans for the future (i.e. whether they proposed using this approach in their practice in the future). The findings reported are drawn from a report which was written by the authors based on the process (The authors, 2011, unpublished report). The report was circulated to all participants who were asked to advise of any changes; following which some minor adjustments were made.

Foróige

Since its establishment in 1952, Foróige has been a leading youth development organisation in Ireland. The mission of Foróige is 'to enable young people to involve themselves consciously and actively in their own development and in the development of society'. The organisation currently works with approximately 56,000 young people across 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland. These young people are involved in volunteer led clubs and groups (e.g. Foróige Clubs, Special Interest Groups), one to one mentoring (e.g. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Ireland) or professionally led youth projects and services in areas of disadvantage (e.g. Neighbourhood Youth Projects, Garda (Police) Youth Diversion Projects and Community Youth Projects and Services). The young people involved in all these structures participate, at varying degrees of intensity, in a range of education programmes based on their needs and interests. A core value for Foróige is that young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, will develop knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for effective living through their involvement in needs led, outcomes focused, evidence based programmes. These include critical thinking, decision making, problem solving and communication skills as well as resilience, confidence, self-efficacy and independence.

While evaluation and research had always been important to Foróige, from 2005 onwards increased competition for resources and a policy environment which placed greater emphasis on evidence led the organisation to adopt a more systematic and ambitious approach to evaluation. This was apparent in its 10 year strategy, where Foróige committed itself not just to making a difference in the lives of young people but also to 'demonstrating that involvement in Foróige makes a difference to young people' (Foróige, 2010). The organisation secured funding from Atlantic Philanthropies for a RCT study of its youth mentoring programme, Big Brothers Big Sisters, which was the first RCT undertaken in youth work in Ireland. The study found that the programme had a positive impact on young

people participating, in terms of increased levels of hopefulness and perceived social support (Dolan et al, 2011).

In 2008 Foróige received an investment from the Atlantic Philanthropies Ireland to establish a Best Practice Unit (BPU) within the organisation. A key role of the BPU was to implement evidence based programmes across the organisation, and to monitor the effectiveness and outcomes of the programmes. To this end, 'proven' programmes from other countries were introduced (for example the Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship (NFTE) programme) and new programmes were developed to enhance young people's competencies in relation to leadership, relationships and sexuality (RSE), citizenship and other areas. Since the establishment of the Best Practice Unit, a range of quasi-experimental and mixed methods designs studies were undertaken in relation to its Youth Leadership (Redmond et al, 2013), Youth Citizenship (Brady et al, 2012) and RSE programmes (Brady et al, 2014). The outcome of these studies is that the organisation now has evidence regarding the effectiveness of key programmes, including feedback regarding issues related to implementation and fidelity.

The BPU was also tasked with developing the outcomes focus of the organisation. The BPU worked with management to embed outcomes focused programme design across the organisation, using logic models as a framework for conceptualising how programme actions will lead to the desired outcomes (see Foróige, 2103). A logic model outlines the theory of change, highlighting the conceptual connections between all aspects of the intervention, including inputs, activities and outcomes (Axford et al, 2005; Duncan, Miller and Sparks, 2004). All youth work staff and many volunteers received training in outcomes focused programme design and the use of logic models and were required to implement this approach in their work.

Practice driven evaluation – the missing link

As a result of the work of the Best Practice Unit described above and the evaluation studies completed, Foróige was in the position of having evidence in relation to many of its key programmes and had ensured that staff were working in an outcomes focused way, cognisant of the logic underpinning their strategies. A key challenge however, related to the fact that, there was little evidence in relation to the efficacy of the core 'bread and butter' work of the

organisation, which takes place through local clubs and projects. Managers recognised the need for some means of ensuring that evaluation practice permeated the work of the entire organisation and was not just limited to the programmes that had undergone experimental design studies. Thus, the organisation embarked upon a process whereby staff working directly with young people would be equipped with the skills to evaluate aspects of their work.

The majority of youth workers employed by Foróige have third level education in the area of social science and thus have received some education in research methods. An evaluation resource booklet (Brady et al, 2012) was developed to support staff in understanding and undertaking evaluation. In order to ensure that the document would be used in practice, and specifically to enhance the capacity of staff to undertake self-evaluation, a training programme was developed for staff. The training consisted of an initial one-day session, after which participants undertook a small scale evaluation of some aspect of their work. A follow-up session was held four months later to enable participants to share findings and discuss the learning from the process. The purpose of the one-day training session was to raise awareness of the benefits of internal evaluation in a youth work context and to equip Foróige staff members with the skills to evaluate one aspect of their work practice.

As part of the training process, a simplified framework adapted from Veerman and Van Yperen (2007) was used (see Table 1) to illustrate the various types of evidence that can be generated and used by practitioners. The participants were all trained in and were actively using logic models and so were familiar with the idea of mapping out the underlying logic to their work. The majority were therefore operating at least at Level One *'Descriptive and Theoretical Evidence'* on the framework, although they would not necessarily have seen this activity as part of the evaluation process.

Figure 1: Levels of evidence (adapted from Veerman and Van Yperen, 2007)

Level of Evidence	Parameters	Types of research
Level Three: *Causal Evidence*	There is substantial evidence that the outcome is caused by the intervention.	• Randomised control trial • Quasi-experimental design

Level Two: *Indicative Evidence*	It has been demonstrated that the intervention clearly leads to the desired outcomes (e.g. increase in skills, the problem is reduced, people are satisfied)	• Baseline and follow-up measures • Process studies
Level One: *Descriptive &* *Theoretical Evidence*	The essential elements of the intervention have been made explicit (e.g. goals, target group, methods, activities) The intervention has a plausible rationale to explain why it should work with whom	• Logic model • Theoretical understanding • Monitoring of programme delivery

With regard to Level Two, *Indicative Evidence,* it also became clear through the training that participants were engaged in qualitative evaluation, with most participants reporting that they undertake a review of work programmes with participants on completion. This is not surprising as getting input and feedback from participants is an important part of youth work. However, this was mostly about satisfaction with the programmes and none of the participants were using pre and post measures of progress to assess outcomes from their work. Through this adapted framework, participants could see how they could strengthen the evidence in relation to their work by adopting such measures. Level 3 on the framework, *Causal Evidence* is unlikely to be reached through self-evaluation efforts. Because, as highlighted earlier, Foróige had commissioned experimental design studies in relation to some of its programmes, many of the participants had experience of working with the research teams in the implementation of these studies and had access to the findings of the studies to help build evidence in relation to their own work programmes.

As part of the training, participants were introduced to a small number of easily understood and implemented assessment tools[i]. The chosen tools were selected for their simplicity and

also because they illustrated some of the core features of such measures – i.e. included reverse scoring and had sub-scales to measure particular concepts. Participants were also given a list of a larger set of potential tools and advised that the same scoring concept apply to these tools. Copies of the tools on the list were made available on the Foróige staff intranet, along with scoring instructions and articles describing how each tool had been used in research. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and shown how to display results in table form, showing pre, post, difference, individual average and overall average. A small group session then followed, during which participants were asked to think about and discuss a group or programme where they could introduce an evaluation tool and undertake a pre and post assessment. They were asked to consult their logic models for their programmes to see what type of measure(s) they felt would be appropriate. The training also included a brainstorm regarding the ethical implications of using assessment tools in youth work. The key issues raised related to the need to be open and honest with young people and their parents and to avoid deception of any kind. Based on this discussion, a set of ethical guidelines were drawn up. At the end of the training, participants completed a short anonymous evaluation sheet. The majority of participants found the training in assessment tools and discussion of how they could be applied to their own work to be very valuable.

After each training group, follow-up sessions were held approximately four months later, by which time participants were asked to have undertaken pre and post measures with a group they were working with. Participants were asked to continue to undertake qualitative reviews as normal but to add the assessment dimension and triangulate the findings of each type of evidence. There were also expected to take a reflective stance in relation to the most appropriate methodology to use and to discuss the ethical implications of the proposed research with their supervisor. The purpose of the follow-up session was to generate feedback from participants regarding their research and to learn from their experiences.

Many of the participants felt that the tools were very useful in terms of providing indications of outcomes from the intervention they were evaluating. The type of information provided was different to that provided by their traditional form of review but was seen to be complementary to this data. Critically, participants could see the value in gathering this type of data and planned to continue to do so on an ongoing basis. The tools were generally seen as being easy to use and possible to integrate into the project work without any difficulty. In addition, a number of participants referred to the measure sub-scales as providing valuable

feedback regarding aspects of the intervention that were working well or not so well. In the cases where results were good, it provided affirmation that their work appeared to be making a difference, whereas poorer results drew attention to areas potentially in need of strengthening.

Participants were adept in triangulating their quantitative data with the findings of their qualitative review and monitoring data. This triangulation enabled them to interrogate the findings and seek possible reasons for positive or negative results. For example, one project worker used a measure of civic engagement to assess the outcomes for young people undertaking a citizenship project. She found that stronger results emerged for two young people who had written up the project for entry to the programme awards – her reflection suggested that the process helped to consolidate learning from the project in a way that other participants may not have done. Similarly, participants identified the importance of intervention 'dosage' or participation in the service to the achievement of outcomes. A number of participants referred to the fact that young people whose attendance was sporadic showed less positive results compared to those who had been present.

A number of challenges were raised by participants. Firstly, they highlighted the need to ensure that measures are adequately attuned to the content of the programme under study. For example, some participants used a Relationship and Sexuality Education measure developed for a related but different type of programme. This did not accurately capture the content of their programme, which thus affected results. Likewise, some participants were aware that they may have chosen measures for which improvement was unlikely to be shown in a short time-frame. For example, it is difficult to demonstrate an impact on self-esteem from short-term interventions. A number of participants referred to the factors that may influence the ways in which the assessment tools are completed by young people. Many of the young people engaged in project work experience considerable adversity in their lives which has an impact on their participation in the process. Furthermore, some of the participants referred to the fact that the young people know what is the 'right' answer to give and are likely to skew their answers to reflect this. This is likely to occur in spite of assurances that they should be honest in their answers.

Lessons learned

As highlighted by Veerman and Van Yperen (2007), ensuring that youth care interventions are 'evidence based', while desirable, is not easily achieved. They argue that there is a need for 'practice driven evaluation', through which practitioners become involved in the research and link it with their own interests. Some of the ways in which this can occur include setting clear intervention goals, using standardised instruments to monitor the course and outcomes of their interventions and building a sound theoretical rationale. They envisage that such practitioner engagement with research will lead to an improvement in youth care practice. Their call for practice driven research reflects Cooper's (2011) argument for youth workers to take control of the evaluation agenda, making practice knowledge and improvement rather than accountability the primary goal.

This case study has drawn on Veerman and Van Yperen's (2007) argument to show how a large youth organisation in Ireland has organically developed its strategy regarding evidence based practice. Foróige initially committed itself to developing different two types of evidence, starting with logic models and theoretical understandings at the foundation level and experimental design studies of key programmes at the advanced level. It has shown that Foróige had originally conceived of evidence primarily as that produced by experimental design studies but over time came to embrace a more holistic strategy in relation to evidence and practice. The case study has focused in greater detail on the intermediate level, whereby practitioners were empowered with the skills to evaluate aspects of their own work, with a view to practice improvement. The process described illustrates that there is an appetite among practitioners for evaluation as a tool for reflection[ii]. The youth workers involved were already engaged in qualitative review and valued the opportunity to acquire new skills in standardised assessment. Importantly, Veerman and Van Yperen's (2007) adapted framework facilitated them to see how their efforts fit into the bigger picture regarding the accumulation of evidence regarding the organisation's work.

The move towards 'practice driven evaluation' raises a number of possibilities and challenges. Firstly, it can be argued that this type of evaluation is grounded, relevant and more likely to influence practice than the more distant evidence emerging from external evaluations (Spence & Wood, 2011). The experience of participants was that the use of assessment tools can enhance learning and reflection in youth work. Participants felt that the process yielded evidence that was of value in a myriad of ways, including helping them to reflect on the overall content and specific aspects of their work, enabling them to tailor work

programmes to better meet the needs as assessed and to provide evidence regarding the impact of their work which can be reported to young people, colleagues, referrers and funders.

Secondly, it helps to enhance the literacy of practitioners regarding research, which will also be of value in helping them to inform the design of external studies and to interpret the findings of research. For example, the issues raised by staff in relation to their own work, such as ethical challenges, socially desirable reporting and fear of the consequences of honest answering, are also likely to be present in and undermine the validity of larger studies. Project workers engaged in this process will be able to offer pertinent reflections and feedback in relation to future studies undertaken in the organisation. In other words, it has helped to create a shared culture and epistemology of evaluation and evidence across the organisation.

While there are benefits from this approach, there are also challenges and difficulties. One of the most pressing issues relates to the degree to which youth workers should engage in evaluation activity. It is not desirable to turn practitioners into researchers, who are diverted into writing reports rather than actually working with young people – in the words of Parton (2009) shifting to practice that is more 'informational' than 'social' (p.715). It is critical that 'practice driven evaluation' can be done in a way that is simple and uncomplicated and that does not have a negative impact on the service provided to young people. A second challenge relates to how this type of knowledge can be best shared within an organisation or beyond. In this case, practitioners wrote short summaries which were shared on the staff intranet if they desired and some also made presentations at staff meetings and conferences. Whatever approach is taken, there is a need for some type of peer review or moderator oversight to ensure quality. A final issue for consideration relates to resourcing. A sustained emphasis on research and evaluation was made possible for Foróige due to philanthropic investment. For organisations that are without such resourcing, a process of this nature would be more challenging to provide, particularly at a time of pressure on youth work funding in many countries.

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[i] For example, the Children's Hope Scale (Snyder et al, 1997), Rosenberg self-esteem scale.

[ii] It should be noted that the process described in this paper took place at a time when youth work budgets were significantly impacted by austerity measures which resulted in short-term contracts, reducing staffing, etc.