



Using an Outcomes Focused Approach in Youth Work

by Dr. Sue Redmond, Foróige

Outcomes and Accountability

Outcomes have been a hot topic for the past few years. Many funders and managers have started to incorporate outcomes as a key way to focus work carried out with young people. Very simply, outcomes are what you hope to achieve with the young people you engage. As well as this, they increase facilitator's accountability to the programme and the young people as they focus on outcomes or results they would like to see at the end of their engagement with participants.

Debate Between Process and Outcomes

Some people talk about preferring process to outcomes (or vice-versa) with a concern that if you focus on outcomes that you can forget the process. However, to achieve an outcome there needs to be a process and both are necessary as you can't have one without the other. When we have a really good process we also achieve really good outcomes. To try to separate them from each other denies their interconnectedness. Indeed quite often in youth work we also generate many unexpected outcomes, both good and bad.

Flexible, Focused and Achievable!

When you think of outcomes ask yourself this question: 'When I see this young person at the end of this programme (or in several years), what would I like them to be able to do as a result of their engagement with me?' Being outcomes focused means that you always have the particular goal or outcome in mind, and it means that you can be more flexible in your approach and change the activity or methodology depending on how the young

person engages and their particular learning style. If you, as the facilitator, have a clear picture of the outcome you are working towards then you can ditch an activity if it simply isn't working and be reflective-in-action and come up with a different approach to achieving the same outcome. Quite often as facilitators we get protective over the work we've put into developing a session or an activity and don't want to let go of our hard work. When you are focused on the outcome of, for example, improving team work you can replace an unsuccessful activity with many others and even draw on the group to come up with some ideas to still achieve the same outcome.

What Outcomes are Most Useful?

This depends on your programme or intervention. Some projects focus specifically on youth offending behaviour and seek to reduce impulsiveness, increase empathy and enhance pro-social behaviour in a way to reduce youth crime. Other projects focus on youth development and seek to enhance specific areas such as literacy and may use methodologies such as cooking from a recipe to achieve this outcome. Other youth workers may want to improve outcomes such as young people's ability to work as part of a team and communicate assertively and use different team building and communication activities to achieve these goals.

How to Plan Using Outcomes?

Three important steps occur in developing an outcomes focused plan: firstly you need to carry out a needs assessment and determine exactly what the particular needs or strengths of the young people you are working with are. Secondly, you need to develop your plan to meet these needs, with a focus on clear, realistic and achievable

outcomes. Finally, you need to evaluate to see what outcomes you have achieved.

Needs Assessment

The first thing to do is to look at the needs and assets (strengths) of your group. What areas are they particularly strong in and consider how you can build on these strengths? What areas do they have particular needs in? e.g. health or emotional well-being, anger management and emotional control, or low literacy and numeracy levels. Once you have identified your needs and assets you can begin to make your plan. Foróige have developed a **Needs & Assets Resource**¹ and this may be useful to you and may support you in identifying needs and assets with young people.

Planning

Once you have identified the needs and assets the young people have you can then decide what outcomes are realistic and achievable to work towards. In this case you could start to develop a plan using a logic model. There are other planning tools available but we find this extremely useful in Foróige, ensuring everyone speaks a common language. A logic model is a simple plan that takes account of the needs or the situation arising, and from here outcomes both short and longer term are identified. Once the outcomes are set then the activities or interventions to be used to achieve the outcomes are developed. It is important to revisit your plan regularly. Does the plan still stand or have certain things changed? It is also important to consider if there are any assumptions you have made about the participants or their involvement, as well as whether there are any external factors that may prevent or enhance your progress?

Foróige have developed a **Logic Model Resource**² and this may support you in developing a logic model plan. We also use logic models with young people to help them to have a say in the development of their plans, as well as for them to develop their own plans in projects such as citizenship and leadership.

Evaluation

The final step is evaluation. Once the plan has been executed it is important to revisit it and see what was

achieved and why, as well as what wasn't achieved and why. Evaluation is a crucial step as it ensures that the rich information from the programme is used to inform future programmes and ways of working. Evaluation can be formal or informal, it can be quantitative/qualitative, it can focus on the process or on the outcomes. Evaluation isn't something to be afraid of as every youth worker is continually evaluating their work. The important part is to plan your evaluation and record your findings which makes it more robust and objective. Foróige commissioned the Child and Family Research Centre to develop an **Evaluation Resource**³ which may support you in evaluating your work.

To sum up, using an outcomes focused approach to work ensures that the needs of the young people are being met and that the limited time you have as a youth worker is being used to best serve the young people, their families and ultimately society as a whole. We have also found that using logic models in an organisation wide way has helped make planning easier, quicker and more focused. Feedback from many of our staff has been that it has revolutionised the way they think about developing their programmes in a much more simple and effective way.

Dr. Sue Redmond is Manager with Foróige's Best Practice Manager Unit

See www.foroige.ie

References

¹ What's the Focus? Needs & Assets for Foróige Staff / Foróige's Best Practice Unit, 2013

² What's the Plan? A Logic Model Resource for Foróige Staff / Foróige's Best Practice Unit, 2013

³ How are we doing? An Evaluation Resource for Foróige Staff / Foróige's Best Practice Unit, 2013

These publications are available to download from the Foróige website at www.foroige.ie/about/publications

