The impact of youth work
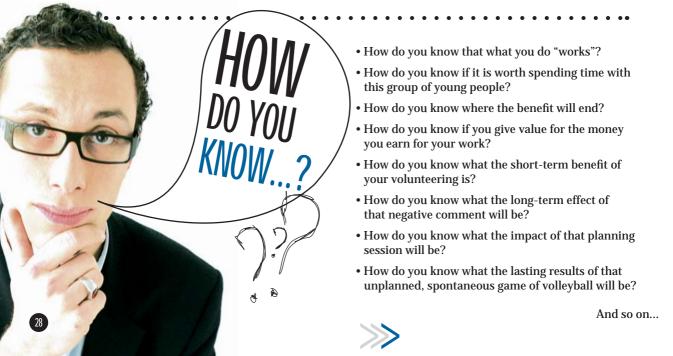## QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

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A few years ago I got into an argument with a very committed youth worker about whether or not the benefits of youth work could be measured. It was in the context of goal setting and we were going through the mnemonic SMART – goals need to be Specific, Measurable, Achievable and Timed. The bit that caused the argument was the word 'measurable': the youth worker tried to argue that it wasn't possible to measure youth work and its benefits. To cut a long story short, we ended almost agreeing on 'observable' – but that didn't really fit with the mnemonic!

There was quite a lot of aggression, dare I say intolerance, in the discussion and the reason for this, I guess, is that youth workers in some European countries are under pressure from politicians to demonstrate the benefits of the work they do. There is a need to collect hard data which can be used to justify expenditure. But even if the political pressure isn't there, isn't it a good thing, at least occasionally, to answer – in a robust and objective way – the question?

HOW DO YOU KNOW…?

- How do you know that what you do "works"?
- How do you know if it is worth spending time with this group of young people?
- How do you know where the benefit will end?
- How do you know if you give value for the money you earn for your work?
- How do you know what the short-term benefit of your volunteering is?
- How do you know what the long-term effect of that negative comment will be?
- How do you know what the impact of that planning session will be?
- How do you know what the lasting results of that unplanned, spontaneous game of volleyball will be?

And so on…

Maybe the answer to these and similar questions is…

I don't… or
I never will or
It's not my business or
I can only guess…

Or maybe you know some really good ways of measuring or observing or re-cording or simply telling the stories of the benefits of youth work and maybe at the convention you will share them with colleagues? Maybe you are an expert but there is one question that just keeps challenging you – you could try getting some answers from those with more of a 'beginner's mind'.

Maybe you want to think about what kinds of impact there could be…

> **Personal impact** – skills, knowledge, behaviour, character

> **Group impact** – interpersonal skills, life-long friendships

> **Community impact** – the impact on offending (crime), on social cohesion

> **Society impact** – a combination of all the others?

> **Short-term impact** – what do you notice? What do others notice?

> **Long-term impact** – how can we keep noticing?
   How quickly or slowly does change take place?

People with suspicious minds might ask:

'Well who wants to know how I know?'

'Who has an agenda when it comes to understanding the impact of youth work?'

> The young people?   > Community leaders?

> The funders?   > Policymakers?

> Parents?   > The police?

> Partners?   > Anyone else?

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What difference does that make to the way we measure or observe or record the impact of youth work?

And who should be involved? Can we be objective enough about our own work to really collect data and interpret it without being biased? How much should the young people be involved? Are they able to see the impact or does it take someone else – perhaps a peer – to be able to notice a change?

Coming back to my argument about measurable goals: let's not confuse an objective with an activity. If we say our 'objective is to put on a theatre play' then it is possible to put on a really bad theatre play that no one enjoys and where no development takes place. In that case, the objective has still been met. But it begs the question why? To develop team work and learn new skills might be a more accurate objective – putting on the play is the activity – a means to an end. The fuller and more precise our stated objectives, the easier it is to know if we have achieved them.

But we might take the view that our work as youth workers is simply to walk alongside young people; to share in their journey and to see what happens; to be there encouraging, provoking, challenging, listening or just keeping them company. Can we still measure or observe our impact or our contribution? How about the difference we make? Who would notice if we weren't there? How far (in terms of self-confidence or life skills, etc.) did the young person travel as we walked with them? Sometimes it's easier to see where we have come from after we arrive somewhere else!

What all this highlights is the fact that youth work for many is simply about relationships – and measuring the impact of a relationship can sometimes threaten the quality of the relationship itself.

Some resources

Methods and approaches to evaluation
http://www.salto-youth.net/evaluation

Measuring success in Diversity Projects
http://www.salto-youth.net/download/976/Measuring_success_v2%5B1%5D.pdf

T-Kit on Educational Evaluation in the Youth Field
http://youth-partnership.coe.int/youth-partnership/publications/T-kits/10/Tkit_10_EN

The impact of youth work in the UK
http://ofstedgov.com/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Engaging-young-people-local-authority-youth-work-2005-08

Guide to Measuring Soft Outcomes and Distance Travelled
http://www.esf.gov.uk/_docs/distance1.pdf