

Bending and Flexing Around Valid Youth Work

Sydney Church
The Centre for Youth Impact, London
sydneychurch01@gmail.com

Abstract

This reflection is the result of working on a UK-wide applied research project called the Youth Programme Quality Intervention (YPQI). The piece explores my own struggle with the concept of validity and reflects on how my personal value system and view of what constitutes 'valid knowledge' have had to change as a result of the realities of youth work.

Bending and Flexing Around Valid Youth Work

I am a researcher at the Centre for Youth Impact, where I am working on a project called 'The Youth Programme Quality Intervention' (YPQI). The YPQI is a continuous, quality-improvement initiative, which can help us to re-frame how we value and evaluate quality youth work. It's based on a research-validated tool that has been subjected to experimental trial and is made up of 70 items, capturing quality youth work at the granular level so that youth workers have effective criteria against which they can measure their own practice. The tool has been tried and tested in over 4,700 youth work sites in 20 US states. The evidence shows that youth organisations that participate in the YPQI see improvements in youth worker skills and outcomes for young people.

In this reflection, I will focus on the validity of the Programme Quality Assessment tool (PQA), which includes 70 items that describe quality youth work. Despite the compelling research findings, I struggled at first with the idea of a research-validated quality youth work tool. My feelings about the tool were formed by my post-positivist values, as well as my experience as a support worker with adults and young people, which made me sceptical of the findings. I found it hard to believe that quality youth work could be captured in a tool comprised of 70 items. I wondered whether the positivist in me could take this on board. It took a while for my irritation with unexplored biases, assumptions, and unacknowledged power, all of which contribute to the validating or invalidating of knowledge, to move over and make space for the realities of the system I was working with. To me there were multiple ways in which youth work could and should take shape. The idea of a single tool being used to measure all types of youth work was jarring to me. These thoughts also stemmed from my time at university, during which I delved into an epistemology of thought that explored nuance, difference, relationality, and how all of these things constantly interact with one another, proliferating and producing new categories, ways of being, ways of living, interacting, and understanding. I also considered how language is inadequate to capture and communicate all of these concepts in the first place. I still hold on to these thoughts and they influence my approach to work in many ways – for example, by not taking miscommunication too seriously, expecting it even, and understanding that context will affect the relevance of the tool and the motivation of different youth workers taking part. Such thoughts mean that it is more important to me to support those using the tool to *find their own meaning for it*. However, as I've come to find out, holding on to these values too rigidly, without any bend or flex, does not work when it comes to the practicalities of embedding an intervention within a system, and they do not fit with what many people want either.

Since starting my job in October 2018, I've realized that the practical realities of the wider context of youth work require agreed upon definitions and commonalities, and that people want or need to be singing from the same hymn sheet – or at least have one to compare to. Not everyone has an opinion about what constitutes quality youth work, and most would probably agree that it's extremely tricky to achieve. This diverse group of people includes youth workers, funders, and policymakers, all of whom have different priorities and perspectives and rarely communicate with one another. This is not a wilful act of distancing; it merely arises out of the practicalities of our massively bureaucratic system.

Whilst I was busy trying to get on board with the idea of validity, I was also setting up calls with youth workers who had contacted the Centre for Youth Impact to talk about the YPQI. It was at this point when my views on 'valid quality youth work' began to change. Despite my reservations, the youth workers I was speaking to were telling me that they wanted an agreed upon, tested, *validated* definition of quality youth work, which would support them to embed continuous quality improvement in their organizations, as well as demonstrate their impact to funders. Later, as youth workers were trained in using the tool, it turned out that this particular concept of quality youth work was not experienced as quashing difference and violating alternative modes

of knowing. In practice, there was scope for difference in the use of the tool and, for the most part, it reflects what youth workers understand as quality youth work and clarifies their route to achieving it. I began to see that youth workers were on board with the tool's validity and concluded that I should be too. I also saw the potential of this tool to bring youth workers together, unite players across geographical locations, as well as improve knowledge sharing and learning, precisely *because of its validity*.

There will always be cases where micro-experiences on the ground will not correspond with the wider system of principles, or the YPQI in this case. I listen out for these dissonances to see how we can improve the YPQI and to flag up what simply may not be working. But the lesson I am learning in practice is that embracing commonality over difference is sometimes necessary in order to bring people together and learn, and that my values cannot extend into all contexts. My own epistemological values often lead me to recognise difference rather than unity, and I've realized that such values can sometimes cause me to ignore the realities of the wider context in which I am working. In the youth work context, there has been an impact agenda for the past 10 years, which forces youth workers to measure themselves against a set of standards that undermine their work, and which is widely thought to contribute to the massive funding cuts that the youth sector has suffered. *A research-validated tool, which youth workers themselves agree is valid*, is potentially transformational, despite what I think about validity and the complexity of individual experiences, which I still stand by. The YPQI is about achieving a vision where youth workers have access to an evaluation process that is empowering and practical. In better understanding and appreciating this, my perspective on validity has had to bend and flex. In this instance, although I will be looking to respect and appreciate the details and differences between organizations that utilize the YPQI, I will also be making space to seek out the commonalities that demonstrate the YPQI is improving youth work across sites and, as a result, outcomes for young people.