

Transformative Evaluation

A guide to practice

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Introduction

Evidencing the difference that youth & community work makes to the lives of young people and communities has been challenging the profession for decades. More recently there has been considerable attention paid to developing evaluation frameworks and tools to aid practitioners in meeting this challenge. Whilst these advances are welcome, there are of a technical nature. If the aim is to develop understanding of 'what works and how' so that we're more able to articulate the value of youth & community work to policy makers and funders, then alongside the development of tools, we also need to critically consider the ways in which evaluative practices enable or disenable us to do this.

We need to think again about the process of evaluation, in particular we need to consider alternative paradigms which are more akin to youth and community work. Participatory approaches offer a way forward. If evaluation is viewed as 'critical praxis' then learning and change can be at its centre. The participatory paradigm, with its emphasis on stakeholder involvement, is quite different to the experimental paradigm and arguably generates different kinds of 'evidence'. There is a danger in privileging any one type of evaluation evidence or evaluation methodology, what's needed is an understanding of how these different ways of generating different types of evidence can inform and support one another.

Transformative Evaluation

Transformative Evaluation was developed through research in a voluntary sector youth work organisation. The aim was to design a participatory methodology that could generate evidence of impact and redistribute the power inherent in the evaluation process in such a way that practitioners could re-engage with what is an essential aspect of their professional practice. Transformative Evaluation synthesises aspects of appreciative inquiry, participatory evaluation and transformative learning to create a methodology that engages the whole organisation in evaluating impact.

Transformative Evaluation offers more than just a new approach to evaluation; it offers a methodology which promotes interaction and communication between stakeholders that enables learning. Establishing a dialogue between the 'evaluators' (in this case, the youth workers) and community members (the young people and stakeholders) is a critical element of a transformative paradigm. Additionally, the 'doing' of evaluation itself brings about the development of practice and practice outcomes. Put simply, by transforming the way we think about evaluation we can transform the way we do evaluation. The impact of that transformation is seen 'in real time'; in improving practice in the moment, by developing organisational learning and knowledge, and in the longer term, creating a culture of evaluation built on collaboration and trust between all stakeholders, which supports organisational learning and sustainable practice.

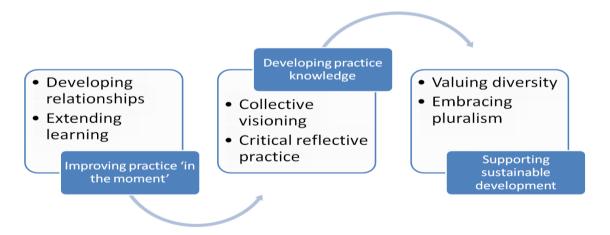
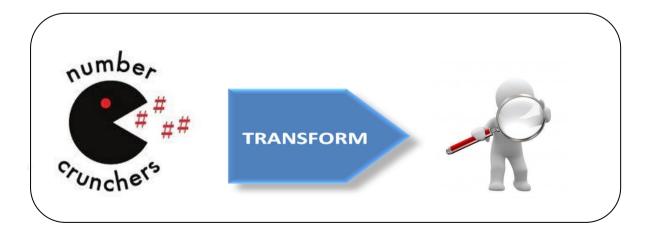


Figure 1: Transforming Evaluation (Cooper 2014)

Rationale for change

It is generally accepted that evaluation has three purposes; to determine accountability, to generate new knowledge and to improve agency capability. It is also recognised that evaluation is influenced by economic, political, historical and social forces. Evaluation today is strongly driven by the accountability function to the detriment of the other two. This shift of focus towards seeing evaluation as a key mechanism of the accountability movement is problematic on two counts. Firstly, the experimental approach favoured by accountability is not only incongruent with youth work but more importantly, it is inadequate for capturing the complexity and demonstrating the value of this work. Secondly, the current discourse of accountability has reshaped the meaning of accountability; from a broad democratic sharing of responsibility (by practitioners to participant, practitioner to self, to professional body, to agency, to funders) to a narrowly-formed technocratic conception based on control, regulation and compliance.

The privileging of hard data has shaped processes of evaluation. The inappropriateness of reliance on a positivist-informed approach to evaluation in youth work is obviously. Setting measurable outcomes is quite straightforward when the 'product' is tangible; this is not generally the case in youth and community work. The pressure to set outcomes which are measurable has led many organisations to focus their attention on those things which lend themselves to being counted (Cooper 2011). In this environment practitioners can be seen as data collectors, as 'number crunchers' rather than critically reflective practitioners capable of professional judgment. Rather than trying to force a square peg into a round hole, we need to transform our evaluative practice.



The Transformative Evaluation (TE) Process

TE is based on the 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) technique which was developed by Dr Davies in 1996. It is participatory and dialogical in nature, it is an on-going practice not a 'one-off' activity, and it is designed to be shaped by those who use it as they learn from its use. Essentially it involves the generation of a number of participants' Significant Change stories during a given time period and the systematic collective analysis of those stories (see Davies and Dart 2005 for detailed information about the technique).

TE follows a 4 stage process repeated every three to four months: 1) story generation, 2) analysis and selection 3) final selection and feedback, 4) meta-evaluation.

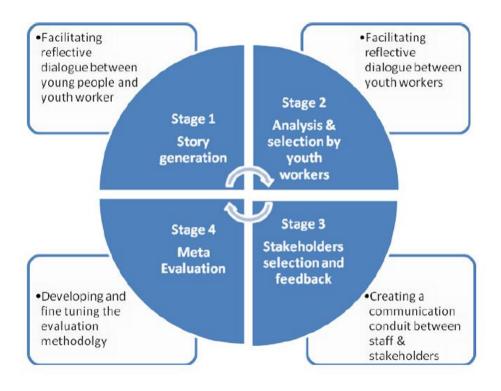


Figure 2: The Transformative Evaluation Process (Cooper 2014)

Summary of the four stages of implementation

1. Stage 1

This stage involves youth workers generating significant change stories with young people. A Significant Change story is the response to the open question:

Looking back, what do you think has been the most significant change that occurred for you as a result of coming here?

Youth workers engage young people in conversation, ask this question and record the responses. The young person is encouraged to explain why the change was significant to them. This promotes reflective dialogue between the young person and the youth worker.

2. Stage 2

This involves the analysis and selection of the generated young people's Significant Change stories. This stage has three steps:

Step 1 involves the sorting of stories into groups or domains. Sorting the stories and assigning domain names leads to in-depth analysis and reflection and can be a challenging part of the process.

Step 2 begins the process of co-co-construction. Each youth worker adds context and professional commentary to the young person's story. Engagement in reflective dialogue with peers about their understanding of the young person's story and their intervention supports the youth worker in the co-construction of the story.

Step 3 requires the group to reach consensus on the Most Significant Change story for each domain. This promotes shared visioning and team work. The reason for selection is added to each story and these contextualised stories are then presented to the Stakeholders Group.

3. Stage 3

The Stakeholders Group receive the contextualised Most Significant Change (MSC) story from each domain and it their task to discuss, review and select the MSC story for that cycle. The cycle is completed by the return of the MSC story to the youth workers' group together with their collective reason for selecting particular story.

4. Stage 4

The concluding stage involves a process of meta-evaluation. At the end of each cycle the youth workers review their experience of using the evaluation methodology with the purpose of developing skills and understanding to inform the next cycle.

Putting it into Action

Stage 1: Generating Significant Change (SC) Stories (September - November)

Significant Change stories are generated with the young people that you are working with. You should be aiming to generate 4-5 stories in each cycle. Basically you will be facilitating young people to reflect on the outcome of their involvement with you and the project, and through these reflective conversations you will be helping them to see and articulate their learning journey. Importantly, young people's learning is extended or solidified as a result of this process.

What is a Significant Change (SC) story?

A SC story is the response to the open question such as

"Looking back, what do you think has been the most significant change that occurred for you as a result of coming here?"

You need to remember to encourage the young person to explain why this change was significant to them. Generating good quality stories is difficult and some people struggle with the word 'significant'. You will need good research skills and if the question isn't working, you may need to re-phrase it carefully. If the young people struggle with the word 'significant' it may be because they are interpreting it in some sort of absolute sense. It may help to ask them to think about what is 'different now' and then to identify what they think is the most significant, in relative terms, of all the changes they have noted.



Setting your question

- Consider the wording will this work with/for young people?
- How you would like to amend it?
- What follow-up questions might help?

Practical issues when generating SC stories



How should stories be recorded?

This can be done in two ways. Firstly you can write notes by hand while you're talking with the young person. To strengthen this method, you **MUST** read the notes back to them to check you've captured the essence of their story. The story is more valid if it is recorded in the young person's own words. Alternatively, the young person can write their story directly. Where possible, a story should be written as a simple narrative describing the sequence of events that took place and their significance to the young person.



What length should stories be?

Generally, the young peoples stories tend be a paragraph (3 or 4 sentences) but some are much longer and some shorter. This will be down to your judgement. They should not be so short that vital information is left out. Different organisations tend to favour different lengths of stories, depending on their culture. Some organisations value short and to-the-point accounts of change, while others favour epic accounts told in an engaging manner.



How much detail should be included?

The story should include:

- Description of the change What happened? Who did what? When? How?
- Significance to the young person of events described in the story. This is a key part of the story. We're interested to know how the young person feels they have changed as a consequence of their engagement, and how this change has come about. Some young people will naturally tell their stories this way, but others may need to be prompted. It's also useful to know how this change has impacted on their wider lives beyond the project. This will enable those reading and discussing the story to fully appreciate the significant of the change to the young person.

Ethical issues when generating SC stories



"Are we open with young people about the fact that we are generating stories in the first place?"

If we are generating stories with young people ethically, we need to be open about what we're doing. Use your professional judgment as to when you introduce the idea of generating a story, it doesn't have to be the opening line of your conversation — it's about being alert to the potential for story generation. It may be that you have a conversation with a young person and within that you see the potential for a story, you may decide not to go for it at that moment, but feel it is more appropriate to return later. Next time you see the young person, you can remind them of the conversation and ask if they would like to generate a story.



"Do we tell the young people about how we intend to use their stories?"

When you generate a story with a young person, you need to explain how the story is to be used and to check that the young person is happy for the story to be used in that way. Because of the emergent nature of 'narrative' it is good practice to re-confirm consent after you have recorded and checked your recording of the story with the young people. You should inform the young person that all the stories will be anonymised at stage 2 and that pseudonyms will be attached to each story. Encourage the young person to assign the pseudonym themselves as this reinforces the anonymity. You also need to take care with the detail of the story, for example in the use of names, projects, location.



"How can we know they are telling 'their' story rather than what they might think we want to hear?"

Again, this is a matter for professional judgment and awareness. You will need to consider the influence you have as evaluator and think about how you can reduce this by probing questioning. Don't fall for flattery!

Sampling

Transformative Evaluation is a selective rather than inclusive process. Instead of providing information on the 'average condition' of participants, it provides information about exceptional circumstances, particularly successful circumstances. This is referred to as purposive sampling. Selecting young people based on prior knowledge that they have experienced a change as a result of being involved with the organisation is purposefully 'biased', not to make the organisation look good but in order to learn from those cases of good practice (Patton 2002).



PRACTICAL ISSUES

- List some of the challenges that might arise for you in relation to generating stories?
- What can you do to address these?

ETHICAL ISSUES

• What do you consider to be the particular issues for you?

The Benefits of Stage 1

"The process of generating the story is a journey in itself"

The story generation stage of the evaluation enhances existing relationships between youth workers and young people and thus improves practice 'in the moment'. The process of generating the stories enables youth workers to develop deeper relationships with young people as these quotations demonstrate:

"the stories they told were meaningful to both of us, from the experiences that had gone on in the Centre so, there was a bit of bonding there whilst we discussed the stories"

"because you're asking them questions which are kind of difficult rather than just offhand comments about things, you create a bit more of a relationship, you develop a

Stage 2: Analysis and Selection of Significant Change Stories

This stage involves three steps:

- 1. Allocating domains
- 2. Co-construction
- 3. Selection



Step 1: Creating domains

Domains are broad and often 'fuzzy' categories of change. They are set after generating the stories and are agreed by the youth workers group. This involves sorting the significant change stories into meaningful groups based on their content and then agreeing a title for each group. In other words, the domains emerge from the generated stories.

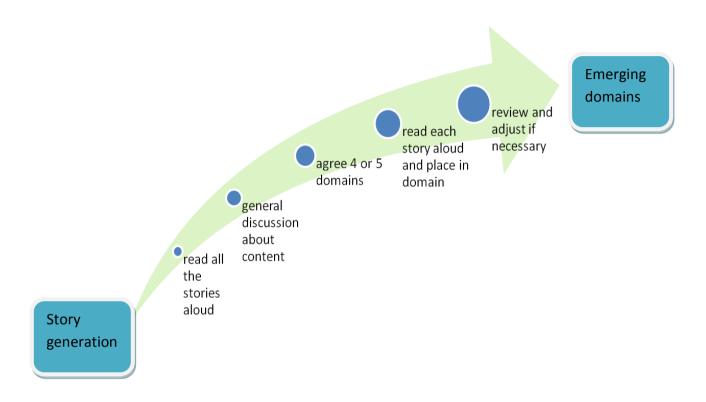
Techniques for developing domains

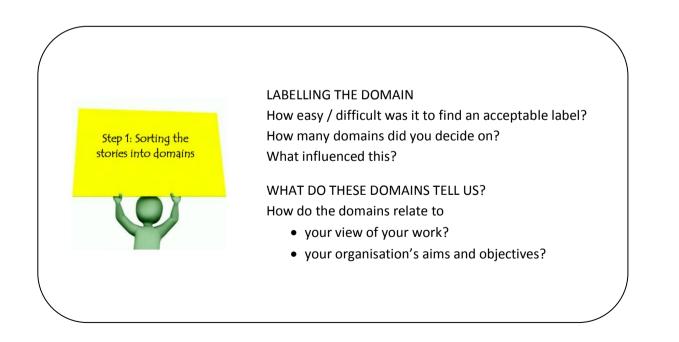
The process we will follow requires each youth worker to read aloud their generated stories, just as they are written, no adlibbing or editing, or adding further comment — solely the young people's words. Once all the stores have been read, the group discusses and agrees 4 or 5 domain names (in other words 4 or 5 tiles that describe the content of the stories). The stories are read out loud again and each one is placed in the most relevant domain. This is a discursive process and may take some time. It is an important step and worthwhile taking sufficient time to listen to and develop understanding of the views of your peers in order to reach consensus.

We expect that between 4-5 domains will arise, and it is likely that the number of stories in each domain will be different. This is not a problem; however should you find that one domain has a large number of stories for example more that 8 of the 20 stories on the table, then you may want to look again at the domain itself to see whether it is too broad. You also

need to take care not to agree too many domains (more than 5 is probably too many!), this is sometimes indicative of the group struggling to reach consensus, and if this should happen, take time to review your group decision-making process.

As we are using emerging domains, it is likely that the domain names will change each cycle.







Step 2: Co-construction of stories

This step begins by looking at one domain. Each story in this domain is read aloud by the youth worker who generated the story as you did in the previous step. This time however you add professional commentary to the young person's story, giving some context to the story. You will need to prepare your professional commentary before the stage 2 meeting. Your commentary should provide an overview of the young person and their story; you may wish to elaborate on what the young person has said or just add your professional opinion in terms of the significance of the change.

The purpose is to provide someone who doesn't know the young person with as full a picture as possible of the young person, their journey or 'distance travelled' and your professional opinion in relation to the significance of the intervention or interventions that enabled the change. In doing this you become a co-author of the story. Your peers may ask questions to enable them to develop a clear understanding of the story and this engagement in reflective dialogue supports you in the co-construction of the story. You may wish to edit your commentary following this discussion and prior to it being added to the story. This is repeated for each story in the domain and for each domain.



Let's review

Having read the professional commentary on the stories; discuss

- Initial thoughts /feelings
- What makes a good professional commentary?
- What needs to be avoided?
- What do you think the challenges will be for you in writing your professional commentary?
- Where's the support to help you address these?



Step 3: Selection of most SC contextualised story for each domain

This step involves the group selection of the most significant story for each domain. Selection will require each member of the group to offer their opinion and the reasons for their choice – no opting out here, no 'social loafing' – your view is important and valuable to the group. If it differs it's even more important to share it! As a group, you will need to reach consensus as to the most significant change story for each domain and you will need to document your reason for this. The collective reason is then added to the story. This process can feel uncomfortable for some, particularly as those involved in the selection are also those who generated the stories and you will need to take account of this when working through this step.

By the end of this stage, the co-constructed story contains the following elements:

- The young person's story in their own words;
- The context and professional commentary added by the youth worker who generated the story
- The group's reason for selecting the story as the most significant in that domain.

The selected contextualised stories for each domain are then presented to the Stakeholders Group.



Let's review

How was the process?
What were the challenges for you personally / professionally?
Did you reach consensus?
How did you reach consensus?

Develop a set of guidelines /commitments which will inform this part of the process in the future

The Benefits of Stage 2

Creating Shared Meaning

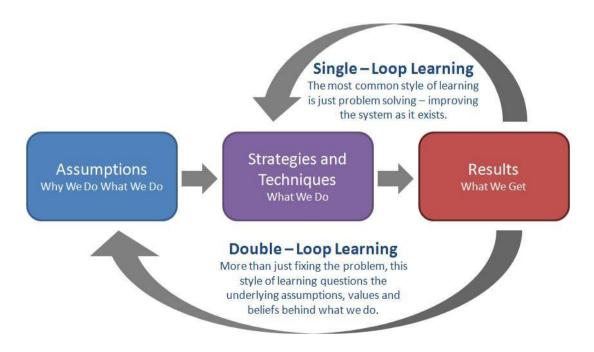
The analysis and selection stage provides a space in which youth workers can intuitively pose questions to each other, negotiate and create shared meanings. This is a challenging part of the process as this one youth worker identifies in this quotation:

"it was nice as a staff group to find out what we all thought about the different stories that were collected, and a lot more came out of it than I probably anticipated – I thought we'd all just look at them and go 'yeah, that one, that one, that one – done' but there was so much to it and it was far more complex"

One youth worker described the selection stage as

"discussing why a story should go through and why it shouldn't and finding out what everyone thought, either individually or as a group as to what is distance travelled and what is an achievement for a young person and working out who has come the furthest and who has achieved the most"

These are extremely complex issues. The comments above illustrate a key characteristic of critical reflective learning in that they evidence the move away from the immediate to take a broader view of practice. This shift can be seen to represent a move from adaptive learning to generative learning, from single loop to double loop learning as the focus of dialogue moves from problem-solving towards active collective reflection on the educational goals, values and issues of equity and social justice.



Stage 3: Selection of Most Significant Change Story for the Cycle

In stage 3 the Stakeholder Group receive, discuss, and select the MSC story for that cycle. They also have to reach consensus and attach their reason for selection to the story. The cycle concludes when the selected story, together with the reason for selection, is returned to the youth workers group.

Stage 4: Meta Evaluation

There will be a process of on-going review during the pilot to enable all participants to develop their understanding and skill in the use of Transformative Evaluation. The National Co-ordinators will gather the outcomes of this meta-evaluation for discussion at the Transnational Learning Events in January 2017 and September 2017.

Timescales

Three cycles will take place between August 2016 and August 2016 as follows;

Cycle	Stage		Timeline	Output
1	1	Story Generation	Jan - March	20 SC stories
	2	Analysis + Selection (YWs)	April	4 -5 contextualised stories
	3	Analysis + Selection (SHs)	April	1 MSC
	4	Meta evaluation	April	Identified learning
2	1	Story Generation	Jan - March	20 SC stories
	2	Analysis + Selection (YWs)	April	4 -5 contextualised stories
	3	Analysis + Selection (SHs)	April	1 MSC
	4	Meta evaluation	April	Identified learning
3	1	Story Generation	May - July	20 SC stories
	2	Analysis + Selection (YWs)	August	4 -5 contextualised stories
	3	Analysis + Selection (SHs)	August	1 MSC
	4	Meta evaluation	August	Identified learning

Examples of completed Most Significant Change Stories

JEFF'S STORY

Jeff says

"While I'm at the club and on activities I use less weed."

The Youth Worker adds

Jeff is part of a very large and well-known family in the area. He hangs around with a large group of friends and is popular amongst this group. Jeff is known to smoke a lot of cannabis and has engaged while under the influence in the past. Jeff is keen to be involved with the project and regularly attends a variety of sessions. He is known to have been referred to a range of services to help him to address his cannabis use but these services have found it challenging to engage with him. Through his engagement with this project I believe he has reduced his use to more fully engage and has begun to challenge others to do the same.

The Youth Workers Group chose this story it demonstrates the way in which youth work can 'bridge' the gap between young people and issue-focussed services. The activities provided by the project have sufficiently engaged Jeff, he wants to be involved. This involvement is not focussed on his 'problem' but on relationships with staff and peers and the opportunities to try new things. Jeff recognises that his drug use impacts on his ability to take up these opportunities and so has made a choice; he has reduced his drug use. The project has been able to take a long-term approach, developing effective relationships to support Jeff to maintain this change. This story demonstrates the success youth work has when its starting point is young people's interest.

The Stakeholders Group selected this story as it demonstrates both immediate and long-term outcomes. The immediate outcome can be seen in the health benefit resulting from the reduction in risk-taking behaviour and reduced drug use which Jeff has been able to achieve through his involvement with the project. It is important to note that the specialist services to which Jeff has been referred do not appear to have been able to have this level of impact. The group believe the opportunity to form long-term lasting relationships with staff has enabled Jeff to access on-going support and for the youth workers to 'target' their intervention when the young person is 'open' to change. A key aspect of this story is that it demonstrates the importance of consistency that community-based youth work can provide in supporting young peoples' journeys and long-term change. The story also evidences potential wider change, particularly as it shows that Jeff is now positively influencing his peers.

ALICE'S STORY

Alice says

"Since I've been coming to Youth Club, I have been more confident, and I have been making lots more friends which I wouldn't normally do because of my confidence. An example of me gaining confidence is with the Talent Show we had in May. At first I didn't want to do it and I was really quiet, but then my voice got louder and I ended up coming 2nd place!! It was really fun and I am really proud. And also whenever I have a problem outside or inside of Youth Club, I can always talk to a member of staff and they always give me great advice."

The Youth Worker adds

Alice was incredibly shy and quiet when she first started youth club. She would hide behind her friends, almost to the point of invisibility and never let her voice be heard. Alice joined the Youth Management Team at our youth club and has gradually found her voice and will now let it be heard.

Alice took part in a music project we ran in 2013 and although she was an active member, she was still incredibly introverted and tried to place herself behind many of her 15 peers so as not to be in the lime light. During the Talent show this year, she sang as part of a duet and with regular rehearsals, really came into her own. So much so, that they won 2nd place (as voted by the public) out of 11 acts.

She is a regular youth club attendee and the increase in her confidence is indisputable. Alice, although not a regular seeker of attention, has demonstrated that she feels comfortable enough with the staff team to discuss any issues she has.

The Youth Workers Group selected this story because it demonstrates the ability of youth workers to "look into the crowd" to notice that Alice had great potential. The relationship with Alice required a determined approach, getting to know her slowly by making the effort to have regular conversation. This enabled the youth workers to build a solid relationship over time, evidenced by the fact that eventually she began to make the effort to initiate conversation. In 2013, Alice was encouraged and supported to participate in rehearsals and the event her participation was peripheral. Supporting and encouraging her over the subsequent 2 years enabled Alice to full participate in the 2015 event.

The Stakeholders Group selected this story because they felt that if Alice had not had any interaction she would have shied away from any opportunities in her life. Her story also shows the ability of the youth workers to reach into the crowd and see when people need help. The youth workers have found the key, her love for music, to unlock her potential. This had encouraged her to go

on to greater things in her life, not only with her family and friends but with people around her. Alice has gone from being totally invisible to singing on the stage in a competition and coming second place. Alice did this in front of peers, the youth workers and total strangers. The group felt this would have a ripple effect where she can help others who may be in the same situation. The group felt that Alice had made the most significant change

DAVE'S STORY

Dave says

"I got banned from the Centre then the youth worker came into my work and I walked in from 'after school' to work. My boss and the youth worker were sitting down drinking tea and chatting. They decided that it would be a good idea to run a tuck shop at the centre and asked me to run it. A week after I got together my stock and float and starting running my tuck shop. I then turned into a supportive good boy from a badly behaved boy. I think now that I run my tuck shop I have made progress with my behaviour and have become more helpful in the sessions. I am really happy working with the community and my behaviour has improved."

The Youth Worker adds

Dave has presented challenging behaviour over a lengthy period of time; he can be rude and aggressive and is easily influenced but also influential. He seemed to persistently be in trouble in the community and was regularly excluded for short periods because of his behaviour. Since getting involved and taking responsibility for running the tuck shop, his behaviour has changed drastically. Engaging him in the running of the tuck shop, enabling him to exercise some power and control, to take responsibility for his actions has giving him the opportunity to break a cycle of negative behaviour. He now takes of the role of challenging the behaviour of others, using his influence in a positive way. He still has a way to go, but progress to date is very encouraging.

The Youth Workers Group selected this story as a significant change story because it demonstrates the value of working in a community. Outreach working allows youth workers to build relationships with key members of the community and this story demonstrates how the youth worker was able to work with the employer and the young person to create a developmental opportunity for the young person. Young people may take on different roles in different contexts, the young person in work was 'different' to how he was in the centre, by drawing these two spheres together the young person was able to change a negative pattern of behaviour.

The Stakeholders Group selected this story as the most significant change story because it demonstrates how to channel a young person's aggression / challenging behaviour into something positive by giving him responsibility and status of a different kind. This example shows how the workers never gave up and eventually enlisted the help of the employer to persuade Dave to take on a challenge and no doubt support him with it. Overall this story demonstrates the workers' persistence, eventually they were able to find a way of helping him, the club and the community showing that positive outcomes are achievable to the benefit of the youth and the community and the business community.

References & additional reading

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