

An Outlook on Outcomes the impact of what we measure

By JT (Jerry) Fest

I strongly suspect we can all agree that outcomes are important. When I present the Youth Development approach I describe outcomes as the 'Bottom Line' of youth work. No matter how you work with young people, the value of your work can only be measured in relationship to what *results* from your work.

I also suspect that the fact that outcomes are important may be the *only* area on which we can all agree. Agreeing that outcomes are important doesn't help us to reach consensus on what *types* of outcomes are important, and it certainly doesn't help us determine the most effective ways to measure success in reaching specific outcomes.

This creates a situation where we may *not* agree on what we *do* agree is the most important aspect of our work. To make matters worse, we rarely even get to debate outcomes because, more often than not, outcomes are decided for us.

For the majority of youth services the basis of support is a third-party contract. A private or public source provides the financial support for delivery of the service to the consumer. This sets up an awkward situation right off the bat, as the *consumer* of the service is not the *customer*, and it is the customer who gets to determine outcomes.

When the customer is not the consumer it directly impacts the manner in which outcomes are viewed. For example, let's say I am a customer who is paying a food service to provide daily meals to one thousand people. I'm sure I would be concerned that the meals meet minimal nutritional standards, and I'd also be concerned about the cost of providing the meals. But let's say instead that I'm paying the service to provide meals to *my family and myself*. While I may still be concerned about minimal standards and cost-effectiveness, I'm likely to be *more* concerned about the health and nutrition of the meals beyond minimal standards, the quality of the ingredients, the taste and variety of the menu, and my family's specific culinary likes and dislikes. The simple reality is that outcomes will be different depending on whether the customer is *also* the consumer.

This reality points out a major problem with the current state of many youth outcome requirements. As they have been developed by customers who are *not* consumers, there is a strong influence on cost-effectiveness -- in my opinion to the detriment of other more critical outcomes from the perspective of a young person's needs and development. This problem is compounded by a simple fact: *young people are not cost-effective*.

Need proof? Have a child -- but that might be more than you're willing to invest in this exercise. So instead consider this. According to a 2004 study (the most recent I could find) by the United States Department of Agriculture, raising a child from birth through age 17 will cost (remember, these are 2004 dollars) between \$180,000.00 and \$280,000.00. At the *low* end of their estimates, it costs over \$7,000.00 per year from birth to age 2, and increases in costs as the child grows older. Between ages 15 and 17 the associated costs are over 14% greater than they are between birth and age 2.

After investing these multiple tens of thousands of dollars, you have bought yourself an 18 year old ready for college. That means *more* investment. Even a standard 4 year bachelor's degree can set you back as much as \$90,000.00 -- and that may be just for tuition. Associated costs can easily run you several grand more a year.

When all is said and done, be prepared to sink a *quarter to half a million dollars* into your child, and that's on the *low* end. If that financial investment has resulted in an average American child they will continue to live with you, at least part time, until they're 26 years old. And, trust me -- this is based on experience -- they'll be raiding your refrigerator for the rest of your natural born life.

Now let's consider an example from the youth work field. For this example I'll stick to an area that I'm familiar with; transitional living programs (TLP's) for street-dependent youth. In a TLP we basically have the same responsibility as parents. The young person is living at the program 24/7 and all of their needs are being provided for by the program or through the program's resources. If we use the previously stated numbers, we can expect to spend \$7,980.00 per year on each resident and, since a parent's *time* is not included in this figure, this does not include personnel and administrative costs. Therefore, annually a 7 bed facility can expect to spend \$55,860.00 in *addition* to the cost of personnel and administration. Since conservatively these latter costs generally represent 70% and 10% of a TLP's budget respectively, a 7 bed TLP should be funded at about \$279,300.00.

There are several things to consider about this figure. The first is that no federal TLP in the nation receives this level of funding. \$200,000.00 is the maximum, and many TLP's receive far less. Consider also that, even if a program were receiving the \$279,300.00 figure, we are talking about salaries in the \$20,000.00 - \$30,000.00 range -- salaries which are simply not sufficient to compensate and retain quality employees considering the level of skill required by the program. But that's only the beginning of the story.

Remember that our dollar figures are based on the expenses required by a healthy adolescent who has been raised in a secure, caring family that continues to provide a basis of support. This does not describe the situation of the adolescent we see in services for at-risk youth. The adolescent we see often has medical and mental health needs that are not considered in the "standard" cost of raising a child. They are often delayed developmentally, lacking adequate support systems and socialization skills, and suffering post traumatic stress from abuse, neglect, and abandonment.

So, all of this considered, we have a situation where outcomes are dictated by a customer who is not a consumer, predicated on cost-effectiveness with a population that is not cost-effective, and applied to consumers who have greater challenges and obstacles than their peers who end up hanging out at their parents house until they're 26 and are able to finally figure out what they want to be when they grow up.

As stated at the beginning of this article, though, outcomes *are* important -- regardless of how they are measured they are the 'bottom line' of what we do. And, despite my treatise on cost-effectiveness, customers (funding sources) need to determine if they are getting their money's worth. I fully understand this reality, and I have been in social services long enough to know that there can be a tremendous amount of waste. I'm actually a rather big 'accountability' kind of guy. My concern is not with measurement *per se*. Rather it is with *what* we chose to measure and the effects of our choices.

Outcome Categories

The three primary categories that all outcomes can be placed in are achievement, prevention, and developmental. Achievement outcomes are tangible accomplishments; e.g., completing school, getting a job, finding stable housing. Prevention outcomes are avoidance of problem behaviors; e.g., pregnancy, drug abuse, violence. Developmental outcomes are beliefs, behaviors, knowledge, and skills; e.g., self-worth, responsibility and autonomy, employability.

It should be clear from these definitions why the overwhelming majority of outcomes required by funding sources fall into the achievement and prevention categories. If you are counting the pennies you invest and looking at what they're buying, it is natural to focus on accomplishments and preventing problems; to focus on things we *want* young people to do or the things we *don't* want them to do (or both). These aren't bad things. Young people completing school, getting jobs, avoiding early pregnancy, and staying away from violence and drugs -- who can argue with these outcomes? Certainly not me, and my caution is not about the outcomes themselves ... it is about *focusing* on them.

There is a law that rears its ugly head from time to time with which I'm sure many of you have had personal experience. It is not a human law, it is a *natural* law, making it all that more difficult to avoid. I'm referring to the Law of Unintended Consequences, and the truly devious aspect of this law is that it tends to hide behind good intentions. This is why debate is so critical in our field, because everything we do is based in good intentions, but good intentions are not enough -- we also have to have good results. As mentioned earlier in this article we rarely *debate* outcomes. We more often than not simply try to achieve what our customers are purchasing, and in so doing we unleash the Law of Unintended Consequences on our young consumers.

Focusing on achievement and prevention outcomes completely misses the point of what young people need. Do the young people you work with need jobs, or education, or housing? Do they need to avoid pregnancy, or violence, or drugs? Before you answer 'yes' consider the following.

Imagine that a young person has developed beliefs and behaviors that demonstrate personal well-being and a sense of connection and commitment to others. They think of themselves as a 'good' person with something of value to contribute, and they feel they are succeeding in life. They feel safe in the world and can create a personal structure that makes daily events somewhat predictable. They are able to exercise some control over their lives and are accountable for their actions. They are able to differentiate themselves while maintaining attachment to community and higher beliefs and principles.

Now also imagine that they possess knowledge and skills that give them the ability and motivation to ensure current and future success. They have the ability to gain the necessary skills for employment, and they are able to learn, think, problem-solve, and study independently. They respect differences among groups and individuals and are able to work collaboratively and sustain relationships. Additionally, they are motivated to ensure current and future physical health and know how to cope with situations and engage in leisure and fun.

Would you need to find this imagined youth a job? Would you need to get them off of drugs, or deal with their issues of violence? Would you need to encourage them to finish school? Probably not, because the young person I just described is unlikely to be engaging in risk behaviors, and is motivated and able to complete school and find employment on their own.

The above description represents the outcomes we look for in young people when we focus on their development. When focusing on developmental outcomes we don't need to focus on achievement and prevention because such things are a natural *consequence* of a young person's healthy development. In fact, it's not that achievement and prevention is unimportant, it's that it is *too* important to make it the focus of our work because, when we do, we open the door for the Law of Unintended Consequences.

Unintended Consequences of Achievement and Prevention

No outcomes are easier to obtain than achievement and prevention. This is a problem, because the easier they become, the greater the disservice we do to the young people with whom we work. Let me correct myself just slightly. It's not that achievement and prevention outcomes are easy, it's that there are *shortcuts*; easy ways to their realization. For example; do you want to get a young person off of drugs? Easy. Lock him or her up for 30 days. Goal accomplished, they're off drugs. Of course, whether or not they stay off drugs after release is a huge question, but the program may have successfully accomplished its fundable goal. How about securing employment for a young person? Easy. Locate a job and place your young person in the position. Goal accomplished, they're employed. Of course, within a week they may tell the boss to stick it where the sun don't shine and rejoin the ranks of the unemployed, but, again, the program may have accomplished its fundable goal.

These two examples highlight the potential problem with tying funding to achievement and prevention outcomes. It provides incentive for programs to take shortcuts in order to obtain the measurable outcome that justifies continued support. This is particularly true when we are trying to crank out short-term outcomes, such as taking a young person who is coming from an 18 year history of abuse, neglect, poverty, and educational failure and attempting to make them independent and self-supporting in weeks or months, years before their stable, healthy peers are able to accomplish the same outcome. The result is that we are more focused on meeting *our* needs to justify the dollars than we are on meeting the young person's *developmental* needs, and guess who loses in that scenario?

Why do we so often see young people as failures and incompetent? Why do we see high recidivism rates, and why does follow-up reveal such a high rate of inability to *maintain* successful outcomes? Could it be because we are pushing outcomes that are ahead of a young person's *development*? And could that be because we are pursuing the wrong types of outcomes to begin with?

Unfortunately, increased outcome dissatisfaction may give birth to responses that exasperate the problem. Such is the case with the new trend toward performance-based contracting. If you are not familiar, performance-based contracting is the idea that a program will receive a certain percentage of funding for providing services (it varies, but usually in the 60% to 70% range), and the remainder of the funding will only be paid based on outcome measurement -- the same achievement and

prevention measurements the program was struggling to obtain under the old system of contracting. While the good intention here is to guarantee that services are working for young people, the whole concept is based on the faulty premise (in my opinion) that failure to obtain achievement and prevention outcomes in the short-term is a result of incompetent services. All performance-based contracting does is 'up the ante' in terms of creating incentives for shortcuts, as well as increasing another Unintended Consequence of the achievement and prevention focus; *creaming*.

Creaming is the tendency of programs to gradually evolve to serving higher functioning youth. If a program must demonstrate short-term accomplishments in order to survive, it will naturally begin to serve only those young people who are developmentally able to succeed in the short-term. The more "difficult" youth eventually gets screened out of services because he or she needs too much or takes too long. The ultimate end result is that we are spending all of our dollars on youth who don't really need the help, and none of our dollars on those who do -- at least, none of our service dollars, we certainly still pay the tab in social and legal costs.

The irony is that, for all of our focus on cost-effectiveness, we end up with the most non-cost-effective system one could imagine, and we repeat this mistake in cycles. I have been around long enough to see grassroots services start up to meet the needs of the "difficult" and underserved youth, only to evolve to serving the higher functioning youth in order to demonstrate fundable outcomes. New grassroots agencies then appear to serve the more "difficult" youth the previous agencies *used* to serve. Throughout this process, young people who really need assistance are the ones least likely to get it.

A New Outcome Focus

I suggest that any attempts at outcome measurement and program accountability are doomed to failure until we change our outcome focus. To this end, I recommend two major shifts in outcome measurement and accountability.

1. Focus on development, not achievement or prevention

I am a strong advocate of the Youth Development¹ approach, mainly because it is research based, and it works. One of the primary tenets of this approach is that perceived problems are not the issue. Rather, "problems" are symptoms of unmet developmental needs. If this is true (and I propose that it is), then a problem-focus is just a *symptom*-focus ... what we need to do is to cure the disease. Outcome measurements, therefore, should not focus on the traditional jobs, education, and/or delinquent behaviors. They should instead focus on young people's development.

2. Measure the services, not the young people

Remember the customer/consumer separation discussed earlier? One difficulty affecting outcomes is that, in effect, we have the customer holding the employee (programs) accountable to the *consumer's* behavior. What makes better sense is for the customer to hold the employee accountable to its *own* behavior.

Resiliency research has shown that young people's development flourishes in an environment of Protective Factors, and we know that assisting a young person in their developmental process is the path to meaningful and lasting achievement and prevention outcomes. That being said, the customer should hold the employee accountable to the manner in which they are providing services. Instead of measuring a program's success by what *young people* are doing or not doing, success would be measured by what a *program* is doing or not doing, grounded in the research-based knowledge of how Protective Factor environments foster a young person's innate resilience, enabling them to accomplish achievement and prevention outcomes according to their capacity and developmental readiness rather than an artificial timeline based on meeting pre-determined outcome measurements.

Interestingly, using this approach, achievement and prevention outcomes could still be measured over time as an indicator of a program's long term effectiveness, but the tie to funding would be on the program's *activities* rather than the young person's *outcomes*. This change in focus would free programs from the pressures that lead to creaming, shortcuts, and outright manipulation of outcome

¹ For more information on the Youth Development approach, read "An Introduction to PYD" available on the homepage of the [InterNetwork for Youth](#).

data, and allow them to focus instead on the specific developmental needs of the young people seeking their services.

Conclusion

Management consultant Peter Drucker once stated "What gets measured gets done". If we measure our success by a youth's performance, we can expect services to focus on performance above all else, resulting in the Unintended Consequences described above and ultimately failing the young people we serve. If we measure our performance based on researched and proven practice that we know meets the developmental needs of young people, then, ironically, we can expect to see greater success in reaching the achievement and prevention goals that we currently measure. Is such a change in focus likely to happen? Probably not, but that doesn't mean that it's not worth advocating for.