

Documenting the Elusive Outcome

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Abstract

A common complaint among staff members of community-based organizations is that evaluation studies often miss the true impact their programs are having. This issue is addressed by introducing a practical strategy to document the “real” outcomes that are being produced by program participants. Included are examples of how three community-based organizations are using this strategy to report the range and variety of results being produced by their programs. The true value of this outcome assessment strategy, however, lies in how this information is presented and used at different program planning tables. The paper concludes with the implications for different stakeholders including program participants, staff members, boards, funding sources, and adult educators.

Introduction

This paper summarizes a strategy for documenting program outcomes that is being employed by three separate non-profit agencies in a large midwestern city. The strategy has been developed in concert with program staff and is designed to address the all too familiar complaint: “We know our programs are working but we can’t always document all the positives that occur among our participants. Most evaluation studies fail to document the really important outcomes that our programs are producing.”

This line of reasoning led to the following question. “What are the real outcomes that are being produced by your program and what keeps you from documenting them?” The answer included an array of anecdotal stories that were illustrative of the “true” outcomes that the staff members have observed or heard about through testimonials from the participants and other sources. However, the thought of collecting all of this data was too overwhelming for the staff to even consider. “We don’t have time for additional paperwork,” they complained. “We have programs to run and people to serve.” A corollary question was then asked. “If a practical strategy could be developed that could capture the ‘real’ outcomes that are being produced by your program participants would you be willing to give it a chance and test its validity and utility?” The answer was a hesitant “yes.”


What followed was a series of discussions that resulted in a set of criteria that the outcome evaluation strategy must meet.

- An outcome focus must be an integral part of program curriculum, not an add-on.
- Outcome data collection must be a byproduct of program activities, not additional paperwork that has little or no direct value to participants and the program itself.
- Data should be relatively easy to collect and report
- Outcomes documented must be real in the eyes of staff and program participants.
- Results must be sufficiently rigorous to be accepted by administrators, board members and funding sources.

The above criteria speak to the social and political issues surrounding program planning as well as the technical issues associated with rigorous research and evaluation designs. In short, the resulting strategy for documenting outcomes must be sensitive to differing interests,

commitments, and priorities of program participants, staff members, administrators, and, ultimately, board members and funding sources. Cervero and Wilson (2005) capture this situation aptly in their metaphor of working the planning table. They call attention to the need for adult educators to be present and to negotiate democratically the technical, political, and ethical issues embedded in the planning process. They call for a double vision through which technical issues of program planning, implementation and evaluation are kept in focus while the political and relational issues associated with social and organizational communication and ethical concerns are also addressed.

Thus, this paper maintains a dual focus. First, a strategy used to document outcomes will be described with special emphasis on the tools and techniques developed to ensure the rigor and validity of the data being collected. Second, the paper includes examples of how this strategy is being implemented by three separate community-based organizations in ways that address their own programmatic needs, administrative responsibilities, and political issues. The paper concludes with reflections on the dual nature of outcome assessment. It is not just a technical research question but also a question involving issues of pedagogy, program administration, and organizational survival. In short, the story of how this outcome evaluation strategy was developed, implemented, and adapted by other organizations is a case study in democratically negotiating, the different planning tables.



GOOD STUFF DONE – Sample

STAFF NAME: _____

GROUP: _____ SEMESTER/YEAR: _____

PARTICIPANT NAME: _____ TOP: _____

GOOD STUFF DONE (Accomplishment): _____

THIS MEANS SHE WENT FROM (Old behavior): _____

TO (New behavior): _____

SOURCE OF EVIDENCE (Check as many as apply):

<input type="checkbox"/> Facilitator Observations	<input type="checkbox"/> Leading Journal
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-Reporting	<input type="checkbox"/> Building Relationships with Others
<input type="checkbox"/> Goal Based - Progress	<input type="checkbox"/> Seeking to Achieve
<input type="checkbox"/> GFT Monthly Reports	<input type="checkbox"/> Reaching the Sky is the Limit
<input type="checkbox"/> GFT Goals / APO	<input type="checkbox"/> Helping Hands in the Community
<input type="checkbox"/> Faculty/Counselor	
<input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	

COMPASS POINTS: _____

OUTCOME CATEGORIES (Circle one):

1 Academics	2 Social Skills	3 Taking Initiative
4 Job Readiness	5 Volunteering	6 College (Accepted)
7 Group Leadership	8 Family Relationship Improved	9 Self efficacy
10 Positive group activities	11 Self discipline	

MILESTONE (Circle one):

1 Start	2 more so	3 condition	4 better	5 almost
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COMMENT: _____

Documenting the Elusive Outcome:

As stated above, program staff and other stakeholders refer to anecdotal data as evidence of the “real” outcomes that are being produced by their program participants. In short, they are saying, “If you want evidence of outcomes then look at what the participants are producing as a result of our program.” The problem with anecdotal data is that it’s difficult to generalize from a single incident. Further, the incident most likely occurred without supporting empirical evidence. This double whammy renders anecdotal evidence of program results to be highly suspect and lacking in validity and reliability.

Still, the anecdote remains a powerful indicator. The following strategy has been developed to transform the anecdote into a single data point. This information is then entered into a database that documents the array of outcomes being produced among individual program participants. A collection of multiple data points, outcomes, provides evidence that a pattern of behavior occurs and is repeated over

time and in different contexts. Further, each data point must be supported with evidence that it has actually occurred and is not just hearsay. Finally, to the extent that the documented behaviors can be related directly to a program strategy and its curriculum, it is reasonable to claim that the pattern of outcome behavior is at least associated with, if not caused, by the program.

Exhibit I. is the outcome data collection form being used by one of the authors' organization, PEARLS for Teen Girls. Program staff members using the form nominate a girl for recognition of having completed a goal or other accomplishment, Good Stuff Done, while participating in the PEARLS program. Nomination represents a noteworthy accomplishment that exemplifies a change in behavior reflecting the kind of outcomes expected of a PEARLS Girl. The information entered into the form identifies the staff person(s) making the nomination coupled with the name of the nominee and the specific PEARLS Group in which she participates. The form also includes a brief statement of the accomplishment and how this achievement represents a change from an old pattern of behavior to a new pattern. The form also includes information on the type of empirical evidence that documents the achievement. The form includes two ways to classify the achievement. The first refers to the PEARLS Compass Point, which allows for a direct connection to the PEARLS curriculum. The second is a set of alternative categories that has been generated from the empirical distribution of accomplishments that is independent of the PEARLS program. Finally, the rubric at the bottom of the form indicates the relative significance of the outcome within the context of the individual girl. In other words, does the accomplishment represent a minor but still noteworthy shift in behavior or does it represent a major shift in the developmental growth of the girl?

Nomination of a girl gives staff an opportunity to address issues of validity and reliability. When staff members meet to review their nominations, they include a critical discussion on the quality and type of accomplishment and whether it warrants recognition of the girl and inclusion in the outcome database. Care is taken not to acknowledge trivial achievements. A major achievement for one girl may not be so for another. It might even be a setback. In the end, the rigor within which the nomination occurs is a function of the quality and integrity of critical discourse held among staff. This discourse includes consideration of the behavior being acknowledged, the context within which it occurs, the available supporting evidence, and, ultimately, a consensus among the staff that the behavior should be acknowledged and included in the outcome database.

Applications:

This section of the paper provides a brief summary of how three separate community based organizations are using this outcome assessment strategy:

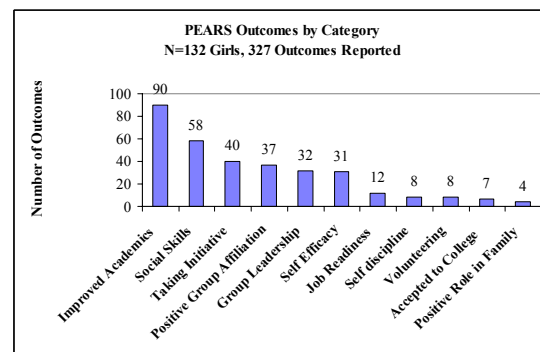
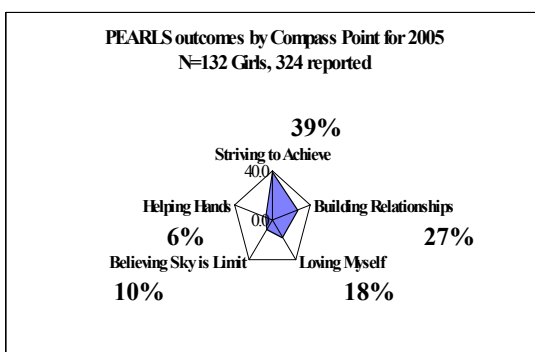


Figure I. PEARLS Outcomes by Compass Point Figure II. PEARLS Outcomes by Category

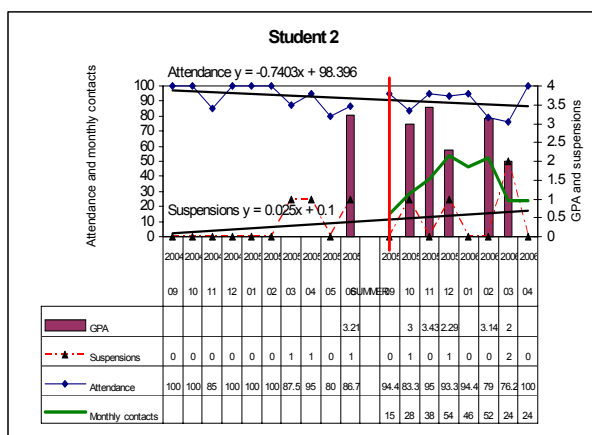
PEARLS for Teen Girls:

PEARLS for Teen Girls is an after-school program serving primarily low-income, African American middle and high school girls. The goal is to help girls envision their personal power and potential, take action, and direct the course of their own lives. The program revolves

around facilitated group meetings during which they practice communication skills, develop trust and respect for each other, and focus on setting and achieving goals in five “compass point” areas: loving myself, building relationship with others, striving to achieve, believing the sky is the limit, and helping hands in the community. Staff members then work with girls to build a capacity to set goals, undertake an action plan, and achieve results. They also help girls develop the critical thinking skills needed to assess and understand why or how a goal was not achieved, so that plans can be revised and a new course of action set. Most importantly, PEARLS uses its goal-setting program to help girls cultivate self-reflection, decision-making, and critical thinking; skills essential to success in school, relationships, work and life.

The above figures show how PEARLS reports behavioral outcomes that girls are producing. The data is based on 132 girls having achieved over 320 documented outcomes. The radar graph in Figure I shows the distribution of outcomes across the five compass point domains making up the PEARLS curriculum. The distribution is highly skewed toward Striving to Achieve (39%) followed by Building Relationships (27%), Loving Myself (19%), and Believing the Sky is the Limit (12%). Helping Hands is the lowest area with only 4% of all outcomes. The bar graph in Figure II shows the distribution of outcomes by category. This view indicates that improving academic performance is the most frequent outcome being produced by the girls. This is followed by social skills, taking initiative, positive group affiliation, group leadership and self-efficacy.

These findings help staff raise a number of questions: A) Are these the “real” outcomes that our PEARLS girls are producing? B) Does the skewed distribution of outcomes across compass points indicate a need to shift group activities to encourage a more balanced focus across all five domains? C) What might be done to increase attention to job readiness, self-discipline, volunteering, and positive roles in family? D) What is needed to assist girls in preparing for and applying to college? These and related issues are being raised by the PEARLS staff and board members as they review their program activities and plan for future growth and improvement.



Student 2
Academic Performance
 •School Attendance: down
 •Suspensions: up
 •GPA: down
RRCO Mentoring, Canceling Interventions
Sept- March Outcomes
 •Interpersonal skills: deals better w. males; also
 • interacts better with classmates;
 •Classroom behavior: from 8 referrals to 3/semester;
 •Great improvement in Spanish B on report card
April-June Outcomes
 •Showing leadership: not being known to school favorite; letting people take advantage to being a leader
 •Anger management: disrupting class to speaking to teachers when there is a problem
 •School involvement: not doing any activities to being very involved in school

Figure III: Running Rebels Outcome Data Juxtaposed with Academic Performance Indicators

Running Rebels Community Organization (RRCO))

Running Rebels is a community-based organization with the mission to serve central city youth through education and recreation programs as an alternative to gangs, violence, substance abuse, and other at-risk behaviors. It maintains an ongoing contract with Children’s Court to

provide mentoring services to serious chronic offenders, firearms offenders, and first-time juvenile offenders. Other services include mentoring, academic achievement, life education, sports and recreation. RRCO staff recently concluded a yearlong project with a central city high school to reduce disruptions in the classroom and throughout the building while at the same time providing mentoring services aimed at improving behavior, academic achievement, personal self-image, and interpersonal communication. The organization was asked to work closely with 30 youth who were identified by school administrators, teachers, and even the students themselves, to be part of the program. The goals included improved behavior accompanied by improved academic performance.

Figure III demonstrates how RRCO is integrating its outcome data with academic performance for each of the 30 students participating in this program. Juxtaposition of the student outcome data with academic performance during the same time interval reveals the complexity of the change process. Academic indicators show a continued downward trend in attendance and grade point average coupled with an increase in suspensions. Conversely, RRCO'S mentoring and counseling interventions are producing gains in interpersonal skills, classroom behavior, Spanish grades, school leadership, anger management, and school involvement. This pattern is a familiar dilemma for programs working with troubled youth. The juxtaposition of this data clearly underscores why program staff often claim that evaluation outcomes (e.g., academic performance) often miss the real, tangible gains that students make. The data presentation provides a framework for RRCO staff to document their impact on at-risk youth, demonstrate the complexity of the change process, and negotiate the continuation of their program in light of the documented complexity and challenges associated with turning the lives of our most at-risk youth around.

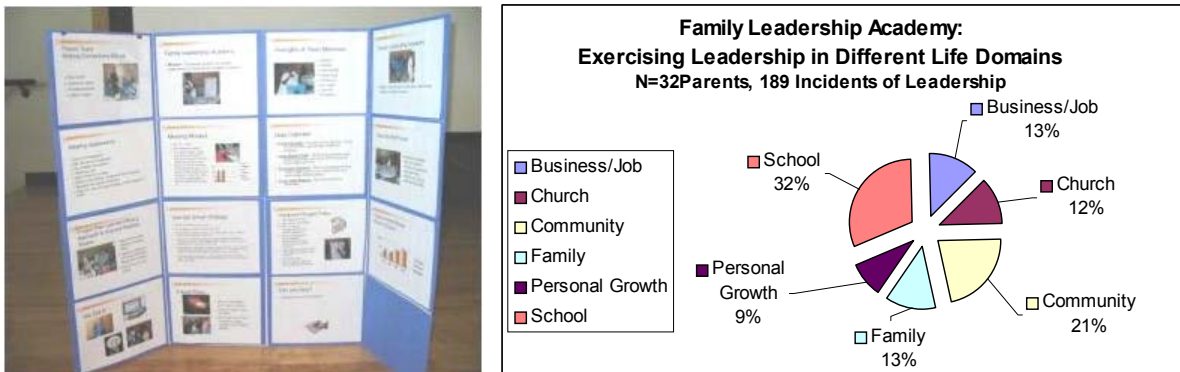


Figure IV. Family Leadership Academy Producing Parental Involvement in Schools and Community

Family Leadership Academy (FLA)

The FLA mission is to develop parents as leaders in schools and advocates for students' success. The FLA curriculum includes interactive classroom sessions where parents learn concepts and skills associated with social interaction, personal development and community leadership. Topics include team building, problem solving, and communication; knowledge related to topics such as No Child Left Behind and special education; and support activities that lead to asset building and home ownership. Parents use their knowledge, skills and abilities in school settings through action projects designed to produce tangible results in changing the school and/or improving student academic success. They receive 6 Continuing Education Units from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee upon completion of the FLA curriculum.

Figure IV displays how the FLA reports its outcome data. The photograph on the left is a storyboard that the FLA parents use to document the project that they implemented within their school. It shows the project goals, its implementing activities and the results that were produced within the school. The pie chart on the right captures the different life domains within which the FLA members are practicing their newly acquired leadership skills in and beyond the school setting. This outcome data reveals that among 32 participants there are 189 incidents of leadership occurring with the schools, community, family, workplace, church, and personal growth. The FLA uses this data presentation to demonstrate the true leadership outcomes that are being produced among its members and their ripple effects throughout the community. The FLA has recently received a demonstration grant from the Milwaukee Public Schools to offer their program in several additional schools within the district.

Conclusion:

The preceding discussion highlights a practical way in which three community-based organizations are transforming anecdotal examples of program results into a database of documented outcomes. Issues of data collection as well as validity and reliability were discussed. The true value and test of this information, however, lies not only in the rigor of the evaluation report but also in the quality of negotiations that occur at the multiple planning tables at which this data is presented. To collect this data the staff members themselves must negotiate their own commitments in terms of agency time and energy to monitor the outcomes being produced by their participants and to make programmatic decisions based on what they are learning. Program participants can use the feedback about their own activities to negotiate new patterns of thinking and behaving that reflect personal growth and development. Agency board members and other stakeholders need to negotiate their vision of the organization and its use of resources in light of what the outcome data is telling them in terms of program performance, impact on the lives of participants, and realities of social and organizational change. Funding sources too can use this outcome data as a “reality test” regarding their own priorities and what are reasonable and appropriate expectations for program results when measured in concrete and documented participant outcomes. Finally, Adult educators and other practitioners for social change can use the collection and use of this outcome data as part of their negotiations when dealing with program planning, staff training, organizational development, and social change.

References

Cervero R., and Wilson A. (2005). Working the planning table: Negotiating democratically for adult, continuing, and workplace education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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