THE CENTRE FOR YOUTH IMPACT

Department for Digital, Culture Media & Sport

# Socio-emotional skill updates for youth work and provision for young people

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## Foreword

Think of it like updating the operating system on your computer – it takes a little time to figure out, and a few days to get used to, but mostly the computer and the work you do with it is unchanged. The updates just make lots of smaller things work better. Our *socio-emotional skills updates* will make the things that practitioners and provision are already doing well clearer and more accessible to everyone with a stake in learning, development, and equitable opportunities for young people.

## 1. Introduction

In 2019, in an effort to think and communicate clearly about all the different things that we believe informal and non-formal learning provision helps young people to achieve, the Centre for Youth Impact published a new Outcomes Framework, updating the previous version published in 2012. Three years on, and having witnessed young people, their communities, and the sector live through a global pandemic, we are releasing a new update. We know from other fields, like early childhood development, that being clear about outcomes helps with both clarity of message and evidence of impact. It is our hope that the updated Framework of Outcomes 2.1 will:

- Make clear that growth in socio-emotional skills is *the most important outcome* of informal and non-formal youth provision;
- Help all those involved in the monitoring and evaluation of informal and non-formal youth provision produce better evidence about the impact on both socio-emotional skill growth and subsequent later life outcomes; and
- Facilitate a shared measurement strategy across the sector and support our collective approach to 'citizen science'.

In line with this strategy – and with generous support from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) – we are sharing the third update of that work, *A Framework of Outcomes for Young People 2.1*, which we believe is the clearest and best supported presentation yet.

In this introductory paper, we make the case for the Outcomes Framework 2.1. We begin by explaining our strategy and then present a few of the primary socio-emotional learning updates that we're embedding in our work. We make the case for the updates by describing the concrete, on the ground value of these updates in practice, and for young people themselves.

## 2. A Framework of Outcomes 2.1

This Outcomes Framework is not the second iteration we've worked on (it's actually the third), but we're calling it 2.1 because it follows closely from 2.0, and our strategy is to be ahead of the curve – particularly in advance of new investment into out of school youth provision for young people in England. It's clear that the current state of the science about socio-emotional learning is somewhat confusing, both about the most important outcomes *and* how to measure them. This framework is 2.1 because, as with 2.0, it incorporates what we've collectively learned from three decades of exploration into the outcomes of youth provision.

First, we've learned that outcomes – in education, employment, health, family, and in the community – don't exist in a vacuum or 'occur' one at a time. These outcomes emerge in chains of cause and effect that are different for each individual young person as they move through different life experiences. In fact, even using the term 'outcomes' is somewhat deceptive, since the outcomes that we're usually referring to are often just behavioural (that is, seen from the outside) waypoints or markers along pathways of individual mental and behavioural skill development across the contexts of young people's lives.

This is where socio-emotional skills (for example, managing emotions or teamwork) enter the conversation - they are the centrally important outcomes of youth work and provision for young people! Socio-emotional skills are critical missing mediators of later outcomes – it is no coincidence that they are often referred to as *life skills* – so it makes sense that practitioners will benefit by learning to talk more clearly about socio-emotional skills, how they grow, and how they transfer to other settings in young people's lives. If you feel like we've been here before (for example, in the early 1990s debate about 'soft skills'), we have. And we're continuing to build on significant consensus here: it is already established that, for young people at key transition points, well-developed socio-emotional skills increase the likelihood of reaching the waypoints that we call positive later life outcomes the attainment of qualifications; securing, sustaining and progressing in employment; forming and maintaining positive relationships; developing a physically and mentally healthy lifestyle; and taking action on social injustices that matter to us.

The second thing we've learned about outcomes follows from the first. Young people's socio-emotional skills that transfer from informal and non-formal provision to new settings (such as the community, the family or school/work) are both *mental and behavioural skills*. By staying focused on this point – that individual outcomes for young people don't happen without extensive internal, unseen, and unique mental skill growth and with increasing *agency* of the individual – we also stay focused on personal development and agency, rather than just obedience to social norms (like getting a job, passing GCSE maths and English, or demonstrating 'pro-social behaviour'). Unless we consider the socio-emotional mental skills – and corresponding thoughts and feelings that grow and transfer to new settings, we will miss the most important outcomes of youth provision.

Our strategy then is to anchor framework 2.1 to socio-emotional skills in two ways. First, by aligning the current evidence base about socio-emotional skills with the current evidence base about informal and non-formal learning practice and provision more generally, focusing on how socio-emotional skill growth depends critically on the adult practices that support that growth. In other words, high quality adult practices that promote socio-emotional skill growth is the central outcome of youth provision.

Our second strategy is to align the Outcomes Framework with the leading-edge neuroscience pertaining to trauma informed practice. We do this by extending the framework more deeply into the realm of mental skills, or the '**neuroperson'**, and the strategies that young people can learn and use to become *intentional* authors of their own development and identities. Importantly, this explanation of the framework in terms of the neuroperson reveals the extent to which socio-emotional mental skills are equally applicable to both young people *and* the adults who are supporting them.

## 3. Six Domains of Socio-emotional Skill

The Outcomes Framework 2.1 focuses on six areas, or '**domains'**, of socio-emotional skill development:

- **Emotion Management** is the ability to be aware of and constructively handle both positive and challenging emotions;
- **Empathy** is the ability to relate to others with acceptance, understanding, and sensitivity to their diverse perspectives and experiences;

- **Initiative** is the ability to take action, sustain motivation, and persevere through challenge toward an identified goal;
- **Problem Solving** is the ability to plan, strategise, and implement complex tasks;
- **Teamwork** is the ability to collaborate and coordinate action with others; and
- **Responsibility** is the ability to reliably meet commitments and fulfil obligations of challenging roles.

Figure 1: Domains of Socio-emotional Skills and their Contexts

As we suggest in Figure 1, all of these skills transfer from the settings where they are learned into settings where they are applied across the life course. In other words: socio-emotional skills *are* life skills. The logic is clear: young people who learn and practice socio-emotional skills in provision, in collaboration with practitioners, are more likely to thrive in the other settings where the socio-emotional skills are subsequently applied.

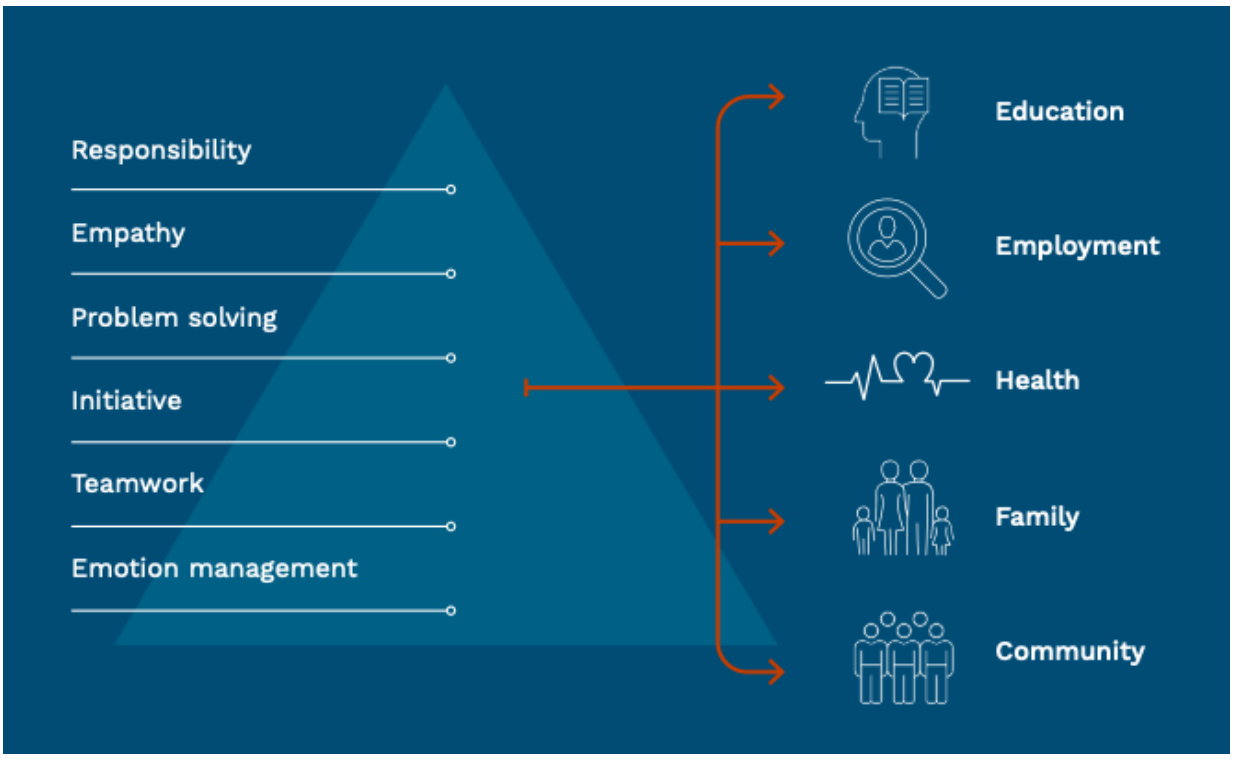


*Figure 1*

It is important to also note that, as shown in Figure 1, all of the six types of socio-emotional skill can be both individual and joint causes for all later outcomes, reflecting the logic of these skills as generic life skills that can apply in many situations.

## 3.1. The Neuroperson

In addition to the six domains of socio-emotional skill, we have also been reflecting on what is missing from the traditional approach to defining and measuring outcomes for young people. The answer is that the six domains mix some parts of socio-emotional skills together or leave some of the parts out. This is partly to do with an ever-increasing understanding of the science and experience of human learning that is expanding our understanding, but also with unhelpful and confusing approaches to measuring outcomes that have been developed over the last decade or so. Specifically, you can think about each of the six domains as having a different mix of the three parts of the neuroperson's mental skill[1] driving the behavioural skills named by the six domains.

The neuroperson approach extends the sorting and updating task of the Outcomes Framework 2.1 to more specific descriptions of young people's mental skills and the neurobiological systems that support them. Figure 2 shows three different parts of socio-emotional mental skill that influence our behaviour, and which change for different reasons and on different timelines. Perhaps most importantly, the neuroperson framework tells us that if we confuse the different parts of mental skill, our understanding of what changes and how gets muddled – including our approach to understanding what changes have happened for young people.

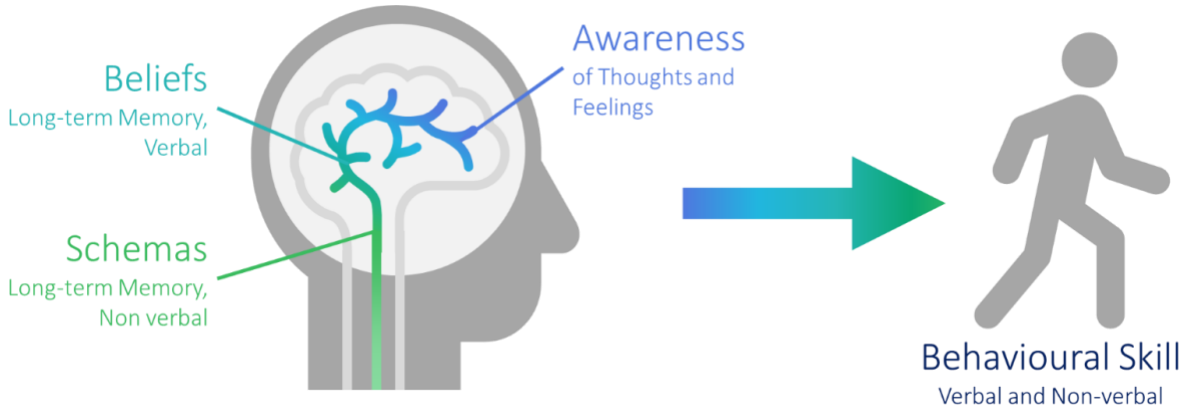


*Figure 2: Three Part Socio-emotional Mental Skills*

[1] For more information on the Neuroperson Model please see the following white paper: https://www.qturngroup.com/2021/11/14/white-paper-1/

**Schemas**[2] are non-verbal memories that carry 'affective charges' that, when triggered, powerfully influence emotions and behaviour. These are fast-moving and unconscious parts of mental skill. For young people who have been exposed to 'too much, too soon, too fast', these memories often reflect traumatic experiences or other sources of stress (e.g., poverty and marginalisation, parental depression, hostility or neglect). As opposed to **beliefs**, which can change quickly, these long-term and non-verbally organised memories shift only with difficulty and persistence.

The neuroperson model emphasises the adult practices that engage young people's **'broaden and build' schemas**: the kind of schemas that develop awareness of feelings and exploratory and challenge-seeking behaviour. Because schemas are most importantly related to patterns of attachment, clarifying their influences on emotions and behaviour reinforces the wisdom that relationships (e.g., between young people and the adults who support them) are the driving force of change in all outcomes that matter. This reinforces the importance of youth provision and processes that emphasise safe and supportive environments with lots of experiential learning. Broaden and build schemas generate thoughts and feelings that are reflective, non-judgmental, and open to new ideas and thinking.

Conversely, **'narrow and constrain' schemas** are long-term memories that carry negative affective charges that, when triggered, produce reactive feelings and defensive behaviour. Narrow and constrain schemas tend to close down or restrict openness to new ideas and ways of thinking while producing internalising (withdrawal) or externalising (disruption of own or others' learning) behaviour. These sorts of schemas are likely to be found in most young people who have had a history of adverse childhood experiences.

There is an intentional path for 'in-the-moment' recovery from narrow and constrain schemas that have been triggered: the use of the **awareness** part of socio-emotional skill by both young people and the adults who are supporting them. Different again from schemas and beliefs, the power to be aware of thoughts and feelings in the present moment refers to an individual's executive attention skills. The ability to focus awareness in the moment and change focus with purpose, so as to manage thoughts and feelings, is the most direct path to stepping out of 'narrow and constrain' experiences.

Using awareness to manage attention to thoughts and feelings is a form of mindfulness and two mindfulness practices are emphasised in the neuroperson framework, both of which happen in moments when young people 'bring' an emotional episode to the adult. The adult's ability to respond calmly and model de-escalation is called *mindful redirection*. The adult is using their own mindfulness as a tool. In moments where adults have more time, they can guide young people to use mindful strategies to be aware of and to manage their thoughts and feelings. In this case, the adult not only understands the mindful strategies for themselves but can also help young people learn and use mindful strategies. We call this practice *guiding mindfulness*.

[2] For more information on the Schemas please see page eight of the following white paper: https://www.qturngroup.com/2021/11/14/white-paper-1/

## 4. What does this mean in practice?

This paper briefly explains the socio-emotional learning updates we've proposed as the Outcomes Framework 2.1 for informal and non-formal youth provision. However, our recommendations are not just to create an elegant framework, but to create value for practitioners in their relationships with young people.

Many practitioners are anchored by their mission to support young people's personal, social, political, educational and spiritual development. For these practitioners, running sports groups, arts projects, or volunteering initiatives is an opportunity to work alongside young people to develop their skills and increase each individual's sense of agency. Often, specific socio-emotional skills are named, particularly the domains we reference above (e.g., problem solving, emotion management, empathy); sometimes they are not named but are implicit. They can have lots of other names.

In other instances, these 'desired outcomes' are specifically named by the funder, commissioner or by the mission of the delivery organisation or agency. These are often behavioural skills (i.e., seen from the outside) like civic engagement, healthy lifestyles, community organising and advocacy, work experience, exiting gangs, and safer sex – often measured by self-reporting from the young person. However, it's clear that these behaviours are driven by socio-emotional mental skills and corresponding emotional energies (feelings and motivation, for example).

Our message for practitioners is that socio-emotional skills building is mission aligned – core to informal and non-formal learning practice and process. Socio-emotional skills are both the generic personal and social development skills and the more specific behavioural skills they are already seeking to co-create with young people.

At the same time, many practitioners and delivery organisations are seeking evidence that aligns with their tangible, everyday practice-based experience of young people's development and yet youth provision has struggled to evidence its impact. The focus on socio-emotional skills offers a way out of this impasse.

The measures we have compiled are designed to tell the story of the Outcomes Framework 2.1: both the socio-emotional skill growth that happens during provision and relationships with practitioners, as well as the longer-term 'behavioural waypoint' outcomes that are mediated by socio-emotional skills. By using a framework and measures that sort out the different parts, the data provides more meaning for everyone. This makes for more insight and meaningful feedback to practitioners and leaders for purposes of continuous quality improvement (or CQI). It increases sensitivity to detect change for individual young people and increases statistical power to detect effects in the impact models that evaluators use.

Our message to those involved in the evaluation of informal and non-formal youth provision is that socio-emotional skill growth is the 'right now' of human empowerment and agency – structural issues are upstream, and the behavioural waypoint outcomes are downstream. By getting our thinking about outcomes sorted and updated, we can demonstrate skill change rigorously with our own resources and pull the evaluation industry toward the missing mediators in their work.

We also hear the serious concerns that attempts to measure socio-emotional skills are creating the image of pre-determined outcomes and targeted, standardised provision – which in most cases doesn't really exist. In general, measurement of young people based on psychometric principles of precision and rigour can feel quite disconnected from reality, disconcerting and potentially unethical. Although traditional approaches to 'rigorous, valid and reliable' measurement involve young people answering the same items (the appearance of standardisation), we know that young people's differing life experiences will often cause them to interpret words in the questions and response scales differently to others (including the researchers that developed the measure). Our approach to measurement recognises and addresses the appearance of standardisation head on. Firstly, we emphasise observational measurement by 'raters' who have been trained to know what the words in the items mean with an acceptable and real-life level of consistency. Training is necessary for both observational 'raters' of others' behaviour and 'self-raters' looking inward. Secondly, we have created all of the measurement items in a long journey with expert practitioners.

## Conclusion

Although the pathways to healthy and productive relationships between young people and the adults who support them may be unique, the neuroperson is universal. Socio-emotional skills are *the most important outcome* of informal and non-formal youth provision and should be central to how we think about and understand both what happens 'in the moment' and the longer-term impacts of youth work and provision for young people. Further, the recognition of the universality of the neuroperson model doesn't just apply to young people, of course – it reminds us to reflect on our own socio-emotional skills, and what we bring into our relationships with young people too, as well as our peers.

The fundamental importance of socio-emotional skills, and the process, relationships and settings that support their development, also acts as a signpost for our measurement efforts – it is literally measuring what matters. Measurement must focus both on outcomes and the quality of practice. Further, measurement approaches need to respond to and support the conditions in which young people learn and thrive. A focus on socio-emotional skills points us towards a much more integrated and embedded approach to measurement and evaluation. In addition, a focus on socio-emotional skills facilitates a shared measurement strategy across the sector and supports a collective approach to 'citizen science': a participatory, aligned approach to evaluation that sits in a genuine partnership between research and practice.

As such, the Framework of Outcomes 2.1 positions young people as both local and global actors in creating both personal and social change.



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