

Title:

Measuring What Matters: Youth Definitions of Relational Impact in Social Change

Fieldwork Question:

How can youth-led participatory action research help organizations measure intangible outcomes such as agency, trust, belonging, and civic confidence in community-based initiatives?

Abstract

Conventional social impact evaluation frameworks remain heavily oriented toward quantifiable outputs such as participation rates, service uptake, and demographic reach. While these metrics support accountability, they often fail to capture relational and experiential dimensions of change such as belonging, agency, trust, and civic confidence. These dimensions are increasingly recognized in participatory evaluation, youth development, and qualitative impact literature as central to understanding meaningful social outcomes (Patton, 2011; Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Fetterman et al., 2015).

This working paper presents findings from a youth-led Participatory Action Research (PAR) pilot conducted through Loudly Labs in Metro Vancouver. The study explores how young people define relational outcomes in community-based initiatives and how these definitions can be operationalized into evaluative tools.

Findings indicate a consistent misalignment between institutional evaluation systems and youth-defined impact. The paper proposes a relational measurement framework and introduces a practical toolkit for integrating youth-defined indicators into organizational evaluation systems.

Acknowledgements

This working paper was produced through the Starfish Canada Climate75 Fellowship and supported by Glocal Foundation, with funding provided in part by YouCount and Employment and Social Development Canada.

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Introduction

Social impact measurement plays a central role in shaping how programs are funded, evaluated, and scaled across nonprofit, governmental, and philanthropic sectors. Despite its importance, dominant evaluation systems remain largely rooted in positivist and output-oriented paradigms that prioritize measurable indicators such as attendance, engagement counts, and service delivery outputs (OECD, 2020; Weiss, 1998).

However, decades of evaluation research have demonstrated that such approaches often fail to capture complex social change processes, particularly those involving identity formation, community trust, and relational development (Patton, 2011; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Across youth and community-based contexts, outcomes such as belonging, trust, agency, and civic confidence are consistently identified as essential dimensions of meaningful participation. Yet these outcomes remain inconsistently defined, weakly operationalized, and rarely embedded into formal evaluation systems.

This working paper addresses this gap by asking: **How can youth-led Participatory Action Research help organizations measure intangible outcomes such as agency, trust, belonging, and civic confidence in community-based initiatives?**

Theoretical Framework

Limitations of Output-Oriented Evaluation Systems

Traditional evaluation systems are rooted in what Weiss (1998) describes as “measurement-driven accountability regimes,” which prioritize observable outputs over relational or process-based outcomes. While these systems offer comparability and scale, they systematically exclude affective outcomes, relational change, identity development, and perceived empowerment. This limitation has been widely documented in both development evaluation (OECD, 2020) and program theory literature (Pawson & Tilley, 1997).

Relational and Intangible Outcomes in Evaluation Literature

In response to these limitations, evaluation scholarship has increasingly emphasized qualitative and mixed-methods approaches that capture complexity, meaning-making, and lived experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Patton, 2011). Patton’s Developmental Evaluation framework specifically argues that in complex systems, outcomes cannot always be predefined and must emerge through participatory inquiry. However, despite methodological advances, qualitative indicators are often treated as supplementary, under-standardized, and excluded from decision-making structures.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of relational goods in social systems, trust, belonging, and social cohesion, as core components of well-being and civic participation (Putnam, 2000; Easterlin, 2003). Youth development literature similarly highlights that agency and belonging are foundational predictors of long-term civic engagement and psychological well-being (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). However, these constructs remain inconsistently operationalized in applied evaluation frameworks.

Participatory Action Research as Epistemic Shift

Participatory Action Research (PAR) reframes research as a collaborative and emancipatory process in which participants are co-producers of knowledge rather than subjects (Freire, 1970; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ozer, 2016). PAR introduces a key epistemological shift from observation to co-interpretation as well as from reporting to action-oriented knowledge production. This approach is particularly relevant for youth contexts where lived experience is central to defining meaningful outcomes.

Through PAR, This working paper contributes:

1. A youth-defined relational framework of impact
2. A participatory methodological model for eliciting relational indicators
3. An operational toolkit translating qualitative insights into evaluation instruments

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative Participatory Action Research (PAR) design grounded in constructivist and participatory epistemologies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ozer, 2016; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The purpose of the design was to co-produce knowledge with youth participants regarding how relational outcomes in community-based programs are defined, experienced, and interpreted.

Rather than treating participants as data sources, this study positioned them as co-researchers engaged in iterative cycles of reflection, interpretation, and synthesis. The design aligns with developmental evaluation approaches in complex social systems where outcomes are emergent rather than predetermined (Patton, 2011).

Sampling Strategy

This study employed a purposive, non-probability sampling method consistent with Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodologies (Ozer, 2016; Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Given the exploratory and youth-led nature of the project, sampling prioritized depth of engagement, diversity of lived experience, and relevance to community-based participation.

Participants were recruited through youth-serving nonprofit organizations in Metro Vancouver, school-based leadership and extracurricular programs, informal civic engagement and peer networks, and snowball referrals through initial contacts. Recruitment emphasized

relational access, whereby trust-based networks facilitated voluntary participation and reduced barriers to engagement.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants were eligible if they:

- were between 16–24 years of age
- had participated in at least one community, civic, or youth development initiative
- were willing to engage in collaborative group discussion
- provided informed consent for participation in a virtual co-creation workshop

No formal exclusion criteria were applied beyond inability to consent or participate in group dialogue.

Sample Composition

The sample consisted of 2–3 virtual focus groups with approximately 5–8 participants each (target N = 12–20). This range was selected in accordance with qualitative research standards for thematic saturation in small-group exploratory studies.

The sampling design intentionally prioritized diversity across level of civic engagement experience, type of community involvement (school-based, nonprofit, informal civic spaces), and socio-cultural and lived experience backgrounds. This variation was intended to enhance analytical depth and capture a broader range of relational interpretations.

Data Collection Procedures

Data was collected through semi-structured, virtual focus group sessions facilitated by the research team. Each session followed a standardized participatory guide designed to elicit both individual reflection and group co-construction of meaning.

Facilitation Structure

Each focus group was structured into four phases:

Section A: Contextual Warm-Up

1. “Can you describe a moment when you felt a program or community space had a meaningful impact on you?”

Section B: Defining Impact

1. “What does impact mean to you beyond numbers or outputs?”
2. “What kinds of change actually feel meaningful to you?”

Section C: Relational Dimensions Mapping

1. “What makes you feel like you belong in a space?”
2. “What builds or breaks trust between you and an organization?”
3. “When do you feel your voice actually matters?”

Section D: Systems Reflection

1. “What do organizations usually miss when they measure success?”
2. “What gets lost when only surveys or numbers are used?”

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019). This approach was selected for its emphasis on meaning-making, researcher reflexivity, and flexibility in participatory contexts.

Coding Process:

Step 1: Open Coding

Transcripts were reviewed and segmented into discrete meaning units. Initial codes reflected participant language and included descriptive labels such as:

- “feeling safe to speak”
- “not being listened to”
- “being included in decisions”
- “trust being broken over time”

Coding remained inductive, grounded in participant expression rather than pre-existing categories.

Step 2: Axial Coding

Codes were grouped into relational clusters such as safety, influence, consistency, and visibility.

Four primary clusters emerged:

- Safety / Belonging
- Influence / Agency
- Consistency / Trust

- Recognition / Civic Visibility

Step 3: Thematic Synthesis

Clusters were synthesized into four overarching relational dimensions of impact:

1. Belonging as Safety
2. Agency as Structural Influence
3. Trust as Temporal Consistency
4. Civic Confidence as Recognition

These themes represent interpretive constructs developed through iterative engagement with participant narratives.

Positionality Statement

Given the youth-led and embedded nature of the research, reflexivity was central to the analytical process. The research team acknowledged their positionality as both facilitators and members of similar civic engagement ecosystems. To mitigate interpretive bias, codes were grounded in participant language where possible, thematic development was iteratively reviewed across sessions, and analytical memos were used to document interpretive decisions.

Findings

Belonging as Safety

Belonging emerged as a condition of emotional and psychological safety within institutional and community spaces. Across participants, belonging was consistently associated with the ability to speak without judgment, to engage without performing competence or identity, and to feel socially and emotionally secure within group settings.

These patterns align with prior youth development research emphasizing psychological safety as a foundational precursor to meaningful engagement (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). However, findings in this study extend this literature by specifying how safety is experienced relationally rather than abstractly.

Within the analytical framework (see Appendix A: Codebook), these narratives were primarily captured through codes associated with psychological safety (BS1), non-performance inclusion (BS2), and emotional acceptance (BS3). The recurrence of these codes across multiple focus groups suggests that belonging is not an additive outcome of participation, but a precondition for participation itself.

Participants consistently distinguished between formal inclusion and felt inclusion:

“I can be in the room, but still feel like I have to act a certain way to belong.”

(Participant 3)

This distinction highlights a structural gap in conventional evaluation systems, which often measure participation without assessing relational safety conditions that enable authentic engagement.

Agency as Structural Influence

Agency was consistently defined by participants not as individual confidence or self-efficacy, but as the capacity to meaningfully influence decisions within systems. Rather than being framed as an internal trait, agency emerged as a relational and structural construct embedded in organizational power dynamics.

This reframing aligns with participatory development literature that conceptualizes agency as “the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them within structural constraints” (Kabeer, 1999). However, participants in this study further specify that agency is only experienced when feedback is materially reflected in decision-making processes.

Within the coding framework, these dynamics were captured through decision influence (AG1), consultation without impact (AG2), and co-design participation (AG3). A dominant pattern across transcripts was the distinction between being consulted and being influential, with consultation frequently described as symbolic rather than substantive.

Participants noted:

“They ask for our feedback, but nothing actually changes. So it feels like we’re just there for show.” (Participant 6)

This reflects what is often described in evaluation literature as “tokenistic participation,” where engagement mechanisms exist without corresponding shifts in decision authority (Arnstein, 1969).

Importantly, agency in this dataset was not associated with increased confidence or self-expression alone, but with the observable integration of participant input into outcomes. This suggests that conventional measurement tools that assess perceived empowerment without examining structural decision pathways may overestimate agency.

These findings reposition agency as a systems-level property rather than an individual-level attribute, requiring evaluation frameworks that trace influence, not just participation.

Trust as Temporal Consistency

Trust emerged as a temporally constructed relational outcome shaped by consistency, follow-through, and predictability of institutional behaviour over time. Rather than being established through initial interactions, trust was described as an accumulative process requiring repeated evidence of reliability.

This aligns with institutional and relational governance literature, which conceptualizes trust as emerging through sustained patterns of behaviour rather than single transactions (Ostrom, 1990; Putnam, 2000). However, participants in this study emphasize that trust is fragile and continuously recalibrated based on consistency of action over time.

Within the coding framework, trust-related narratives were primarily captured through follow-through reliability (TR1), communication consistency (TR2), and time-based trust building (TR4).

Participants frequently described trust not in terms of emotional affinity, but as behavioural predictability:

“I trust them because they always do what they say they’re going to do. It builds over time.” (Participant 2)

Conversely, breakdowns in trust were strongly associated with inconsistencies between stated commitments and observed actions:

“They said they would follow up, but they never did. After that, I stopped believing them.” (Participant 1)

These findings suggest that trust in community-based programming is less dependent on relational warmth or initial engagement quality, and more dependent on the consistency of institutional follow-through. Importantly, trust was found to function as a gatekeeping condition for deeper participation. Participants reported that sustained engagement only occurs when trust thresholds are met. This positions trust not as an outcome metric, but as a precondition for continued relational participation.

Civic Confidence as Recognition

Civic confidence was defined by participants as the sense of being recognized, heard, and taken seriously within civic or institutional spaces. Unlike general confidence or self-efficacy, civic confidence was explicitly tied to external validation and recognition of voice within decision-making contexts.

This aligns with civic participation literature linking recognition and perceived legitimacy to sustained engagement in civic life (Putnam, 2000). However, participants in this study extend this framing by emphasizing that civic confidence is not only about being heard, but about whether that input is perceived as consequential.

Within the analytical framework, these narratives were captured through voice recognition (CC1), contribution validation (CC2), and civic exclusion (CC3).

A recurring pattern was the distinction between being listened to and being taken seriously:

“People hear you, but it doesn’t mean they take what you say seriously.” (Participant 4)

This distinction highlights a structural gap in many participatory systems, where listening is often treated as equivalent to inclusion in decision-making processes.

Participants further described civic confidence as something that either accumulates or erodes based on repeated experiences of recognition:

“After a while, if nothing changes from what you say, you just stop speaking up.”

(Participant 5)

This suggests that civic confidence is not a stable trait but a dynamic relational outcome shaped by institutional responsiveness. These findings indicate that civic confidence should be measured through the perceived impact of voice within civic systems.

Discussion

Findings indicate a structural misalignment between institutional evaluation systems and youth-defined conceptions of impact. Where conventional frameworks emphasize outputs and participation metrics, youth participants consistently emphasize relational conditions as foundational to meaningful change. This supports prior critiques of output-driven evaluation systems (Weiss, 1998; OECD, 2020) and extends them by demonstrating how relational outcomes are not only missing from measurement systems but actively defined by stakeholders in participatory contexts.

These findings are synthesized into the Relational Impact Measurement Framework presented in the accompanying toolkit (Relational Impact Measurement Toolkit v1.0). The toolkit operationalizes the four relational domains identified in this study, belonging, agency, trust, and civic confidence, into applied indicators, measurement instruments, and implementation guidance. Its purpose is to translate qualitative relational insights into structured tools that can be used by organizations to redesign how impact is evaluated in practice.

Limitations

This study represents an early-stage participatory pilot and should be interpreted within the constraints of an exploratory research design. It does not constitute a statistically representative sample and is not intended to produce generalizable findings across populations or contexts. Instead, the study prioritizes depth of relational insight over breadth of demographic coverage, consistent with Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodologies that emphasize situated knowledge production and co-constructed meaning.

A key limitation is the scale and scope of participant engagement. The focus groups were conducted within a limited geographic context (Metro Vancouver) and may not fully capture regional, cultural, or institutional variations in how relational outcomes such as belonging, agency, trust, and civic confidence are experienced. As a result, the relational domains identified in this study should be understood as contextually grounded constructs rather than universal categories.

Additionally, while the coding framework was developed through systematic thematic analysis, it remains an interpretive tool shaped by researcher positionality and participant discourse. Although efforts were made to ensure reflexivity and consistency in coding procedures, qualitative analysis inherently involves subjective interpretation, particularly in the translation of lived experience into structured analytical categories.

Finally, the Relational Impact Measurement Toolkit presented alongside this paper represents a conceptual and early-stage operational framework. It has not yet undergone large-scale implementation, longitudinal testing, or external validation across diverse

organizational settings. Further refinement through iterative field testing, comparative case studies, and cross-context application is necessary to assess its reliability, adaptability, and practical utility in varied institutional environments. Future research should focus on validating the framework across multiple cohorts, refining indicator sensitivity, and testing how relational metrics perform alongside conventional quantitative evaluation systems.

Conclusion

This working paper argues that conventional social impact measurement systems remain structurally limited in their ability to capture relational dimensions of social change. Existing evaluation frameworks tend to prioritize outputs and quantifiable indicators, which can obscure the lived, relational experiences that communities themselves often identify as most meaningful forms of impact.

Through a youth-led Participatory Action Research (PAR) design, this study identifies four core relational dimensions of impact: belonging as safety, agency as structural influence, trust as temporal consistency, and civic confidence as recognition. These findings suggest that social impact is not solely an outcome to be measured after intervention, but a set of relational conditions that shape whether meaningful participation and change can occur in the first place.

In integrating PAR with relational evaluation approaches, this study proposes a shift from output-centric evaluation models toward relationally grounded systems of impact assessment. In this model, participants are not treated as data sources external to evaluation processes, but as co-creators of the indicators through which impact is defined and understood.

The contribution of this work is therefore twofold. First, it offers an empirically grounded conceptual framework for understanding relational dimensions of social change. Second, it introduces an applied measurement system, the Relational Impact Measurement Toolkit v1.0, that translates these insights into structured indicators and practical evaluation tools for organizations working in youth engagement, community development, and civic programming.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Belonging / Safety Domain (BS)

Code	Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Example Indicators
BS1: Psychological Safety	Feeling safe to express thoughts, identity, or disagreement	Mentions of comfort, openness, lack of fear	“I can speak without worrying about being judged”
BS2: Non-Performance Inclusion	Feeling included without needing to perform competence or identity	Authenticity, not “acting a role”	“I don’t have to act a certain way to fit in”
BS3: Emotional Acceptance	Feeling welcomed and accepted by others in the space	Inclusion, warmth, belonging language	“They actually accept me as I am”
BS4: Exclusion Experience	Absence of belonging or feelings of alienation	Isolation, invisibility, discomfort	“I felt like I didn’t belong there”

Appendix B: Agency / Influence Domain (AG)

Code	Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Example Indicators
AG1: Decision Influence	Input directly shaping outcomes or decisions	Observable change resulting from input	“They actually changed something based on our feedback”
AG2: Consultation Without Impact	Being asked for input without resulting change	Tokenistic consultation	“They asked us but nothing changed”
AG3: Co-Design Participation	Shared design or creation of programs	Joint planning or collaboration	“We helped design the program together”
AG4: Decision Exclusion	Absence from decision-making structures	No opportunity for input	“We weren’t part of any decisions”

Appendix C: Trust / Consistency Domain (TR)

Code	Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Example Indicators
TR1: Follow-Through Reliability	Consistency between promises and actions	Commitments fulfilled	“They actually did what they said they would”
TR2: Communication Consistency	Predictable and clear communication patterns	Regular updates, clarity	“They always communicate clearly”
TR3: Broken Trust Experience	Failure to follow through or inconsistency	Missed commitments	“They said they would follow up but didn’t”
TR4: Time-Based Trust Building	Trust developing gradually over repeated interactions	Long-term reliability	“Over time I started trusting them more”

Civic Confidence / Recognition Domain (CC)

Code	Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Example Indicators
TR1: Follow-Through Reliability	Consistency between promises and actions	Commitments fulfilled	“They actually did what they said they would”
TR2: Communication Consistency	Predictable and clear communication patterns	Regular updates, clarity	“They always communicate clearly”
TR3: Broken Trust Experience	Failure to follow through or inconsistency	Missed commitments	“They said they would follow up but didn’t”
TR4: Time-Based Trust Building	Trust developing gradually over repeated interactions	Long-term reliability	“Over time I started trusting them more”