

The benefits of participatory evaluation for children and youth

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Introduction

With the 1998 special issue of the journal *New Directions in Evaluation* on 'Understanding and Practicing Participatory Evaluation', participatory evaluation clearly entered the mainstream dialogue about evaluation and, moreover, showed itself to be the method of choice for an increasing number of evaluators. In the three years since that publication, a new "new direction in evaluation" is appearing on the landscape – the inclusion of youth as members of the participatory evaluation team. While the number of participatory evaluators working with youth is still small, there is wide interest in their work not only by evaluators, but educators, youth workers, researchers, funders, and children's and human rights advocates as well. No doubt this interest is due to the fact that youth involvement in evaluation projects touches on so many issues of concern to these professionals, including youth development, empowerment, decision making, community development, capacity building, organisational democracy, social justice and the relevance and usefulness of evaluation data.

The benefits of child and youth participation have long been understood within international development, a field in which young people have been involved in action research, environmental activism, and planning and monitoring their own programmes. Those who have studied these efforts (Iacofano, 1985; Solomone, 1996; Sutton, 1985; Van Wagenber *et al.*, 1981; Whitmore, 1988) argue that children and youth are significantly impacted through the process of participation. They maintain that young people gain self-esteem, become empowered, learn new skills, and develop into more active citizens. While these outcomes make a compelling case for youth participation, the extent to which youth have participated and exactly what they have participated in is often unclear.

As this emerging field of youth as evaluators begins to gain momentum, it is important to stop for a moment and look at what is meant by participation: participation in what? by whom? under what circumstances? and to what end? In order to address some of these questions, this article will take a careful look at the specific experiences of some youth evaluators and how these relate to both their programmes and their evaluation processes.

Description of the study

Case study data from four evaluation projects will be presented.¹ These projects were conducted in different programme contexts and employed different types of participatory processes. Two of the evaluation projects were conducted in highly participatory programmes, one entirely run by youth and the other led in concert with a team of adult advisors. The remaining two evaluation projects were conducted in programmes that had little youth participation; however, the evaluation process was highly participatory. The findings are organised below in two categories: participatory evaluations of youth-run programmes and participatory evaluations of non-participatory programmes.

Description of findings

Participatory evaluations of youth-led/run programmes

The first evaluation project was conducted within The Center for Young Women's Development (The Center). The Center is a youth-run harm reduction programme that employs young homeless women. This programme is located in downtown San Francisco and serves predominately African American and Latino youth (ages 13–21). The evaluation project was initiated by a funder as part of an overall grant requirement. In keeping with the programme's highly participatory and inclusive approach to youth development, youth staff members hired an outside consultant to train them in evaluation techniques. All senior level staff members (who at this time were under 20 years of age) were involved in defining evaluation questions, developing an overall evaluation plan, developing evaluation instruments, collecting data, analysing data and writing the final report.

Initially the youth felt that the evaluation was an imposition; however, they soon came to value the process and learned much about their programme and their clients. Findings from the evaluation effort helped them

¹ The data described here were part of a larger research effort that looked at twenty participatory evaluations involving youth. Out of these twenty programmes, four were strategically selected as case studies (see Sabo, 1999).

to modify the programme and better target and serve their population. Further, once they learned the value of collecting ongoing data about their programme, they incorporated evaluation strategies into many of their everyday activities.

The evaluation process supported the young people to collect systematic information about both service delivery and youth outcomes. The data allowed them to see the type of impacts their programme was having on the community. Denise (age 19) said they would continue to survey the community for three reasons:

First, to allow the young women on the street to voice their opinions about their needs; second, to let them know that the programme really cares about what they have to say; and third, to allow the youth staff to feel good about what they are doing.

All the young people interviewed were extremely proud of their work. The evaluation process afforded them the opportunity to reflect on the impacts their programmes have on the community, and provided them with evidence of their effectiveness as social change agents. As youth saw the results of their hard work, they became more committed to the evaluation process and their programme. For example, Shaniqua (age 18):

We learned the importance of evaluation. That not only is it really important to funders – we have to have this in by a certain day – but this is a really good tool for you to know.

The second evaluation project focused on the Town Youth Participation Strategy (TYPS), a youth-led drop-in center serving primarily low-income Caucasian youth (ages 12–19) living in rural Ottawa. TYPS is a prevention strategy seeking to reduce drug and alcohol abuse in the community by providing young people with a place to hang out, while simultaneously supporting them to have voice in the community. The programme was required to report monthly to the local town councils. Evaluation methods were built directly into everyday activities and youth developed monthly reports to share with the community. Young people from the programme kept minutes, interviewed youth participants, kept attendance records and led periodic focus groups. All these data were kept in a scrapbook as part of the institutional memory as the young leaders aged-out and passed the programme on to the next generation.

Like the youth at The Center, these young people came to appreciate the value of evaluation as an ongoing learning tool and were able to see first-hand their effects on the community. The data allowed them to clearly understand their programme's impact on youth, highlighting the importance of "ownership." For example, Beth (age 17)

talked about the data from their evaluation effort and how important it was for young people to be part of the decision-making process within their programme.

For me, it seems that kids really need to own something. Kids don't own anything. They don't have any say over what kind of schooling they're thrown into; they don't have any say as to what their family is about; they basically don't have very much control over their lives.

Here again, youth clearly saw themselves as social change agents and were very proud of the work they were doing and the changes they were making. Dan (age 18) stated:

I enjoyed creating the programme. And I want to be a part of that for the youth, for the younger youth, so they have somewhere that they can go, so that they don't feel that they're only doing nothing, and you feel good knowing that you got to do it.

In both The Center and TYPS, young people were involved in every aspect of the evaluation. The benefits of participation were clear to them; they reported learning many new evaluation skills, developing new relationships with one another, and a new understanding of their programme and evaluation. Particularly salient to the youth evaluators was the development of new types of relationships with peers and adult consultants. For example, Denise (age 17, The Center), said her programme was:

A place to dream and be who you are, be comfortable with who you are, not have to lie. Honesty is really important here, because a lot of places, you have to lie about everything, to your parents, your own stuff, everything.

Karen (age 15, TYPS) talked about the importance of working with adults as equals:

You also got to get more interpersonal feelings. You're dealing with people. Like you certainly develop the more mature relationships with adult people that you weren't getting. I wasn't getting that before I got involved with TYPS because where would you get it? From your parents? Nah.

Additionally, in both programmes, the young people were also engaged in all decision-making processes related to the programme. This combination of high-level participation in both programme and evaluation allowed these young people to use evaluation findings to make significant changes within their programmes. Further, it afforded them the opportunity to employ evaluation strategies in other aspects of their programme. Youth in these programmes were defining both the programme

practice and their evaluation processes. In this way, the benefits of participating in programme decision-making and development could not easily be separated from the benefits of participating in the evaluation process. Rather, it appeared that participation in one supported and supplemented participation in the other.

Participatory evaluations of non-participatory programmes

The third youth evaluation project was a coalition of youth programmes that came together to evaluate the juvenile justice system in San Francisco. The coalition hired young people who were previously in the juvenile justice system. They were trained by an adult evaluation consultant and worked side-by-side with university professors to articulate the evaluation design and questions. The youth evaluators conducted interviews and focus groups with hundreds of youth in the community, focusing on their experiences with the juvenile justice system and supporting them to articulate the future needs of youth. They analysed these data utilising a statistical programme, wrote a final report and presented it to the city. This youth evaluation team worked very hard to obtain buy-in from the adults prior to the beginning of the project and made sure that youth would have a "hearing" to report their findings and recommendations. In this way, youth were able to have a significant impact on the development of several new programmes created for the juvenile justice system.

Similar to the sentiments articulated by youth in the first two evaluation projects, young people in this project felt proud of their ability to affect social change. They saw the value of evaluation as a social change tool and were very invested in impacting the system for other young people. Debbie (age 16) said:

We're all kinda here because we are interested in making a change, so we're all working toward the same goal. When we're at school it's not like everybody wants to be there so it's just like people don't care what happens.

Further, they felt very strongly that their evaluation data would facilitate the development of a stronger, more youth-friendly juvenile justice system. When Daryl (age 19) was asked what impact the evaluation might make, he said:

Hopefully a lot of good, a lot of change in the juvenile justice system, a lot of programmes, hopefully will come out of this to help youth, you know what I'm saying? To help people have other objectives and other options in doing what they do.

Similar to the first two evaluation projects, these youth developed valuable evaluation skills and were excited by the new job opportunities that may now become available to them. Jennifer (age 17) put it this way:

You can take this experience outside. You know how to develop instruments. You are going to put this data into the computer. We're going to learn this programme together. We're going to come up with statistics... that was just like, Wow!

The fourth evaluation project focused on a youth drop-in center serving street children (ages 15–20) in an urban city located in Canada. This project differed in important ways from the other three. First, the drop-in centre is run entirely by adults and has no youth involvement in decision-making processes. Second, the youth evaluation project was initiated by an outside consultant without complete buy-in from staff members, and, consequently, staff involvement with the evaluation project was limited. Within these limits, a select group of youth was highly involved in the evaluation project and worked closely with the evaluation consultant in a democratic process. The youth evaluation team developed, implemented and analysed a community-wide survey that asked businesses to articulate their views of the drop-in centre. They also interviewed a number of staff members and youth programme participants. A full report of this information was generated by the youth in a creative report that utilised youth artwork, colourful tables and photographs. This report was presented to key staff members at the centre. However, the youth did not feel optimistic about their recommendations being implemented. Jay (age 19) said:

I don't think it would be possible for them [the adults in power] to take all of our recommendations and do them all in one shot. It might take some time to do some things and some of them they might not be able to because of their guidelines.

Ultimately, these youth evaluators were able to make few programmatic changes. The programmes rigidity and the lack of youth participation in decision-making processes made substantive change nearly impossible. Youth evaluators in this context did not place the same value on evaluation as in the highly participatory programmes described above. They were not able to utilise the findings nor were they able to employ the practices in other aspects of the programme. Further, because these youth felt no ownership of their programme, they did not experience the same feelings of pride when reflecting on programmatic impacts.

While young people were not overly enthusiastic about future programmatic change, they were excited about the benefits they gained by working on the evaluation project. Like youth evaluators in the other case studies, these youth felt that they learned to work in groups, gained financial benefits, developed valuable skills, gained a sense of self-efficacy and confidence, and became more respected by the staff. Also, very much like the three previous projects,

these youth evaluators articulated the valuable experiences they had with peers and adults. Jay (age 18) stated:

You get to know other people. ...Tolerance. Big tolerance thing because I'm not a group person. I got a little bit closer to some of the members too. I feel like I made friends, like I can talk. I learned to know when not to put my two cents in. I used to interrupt a lot and I worked on that a lot.

Maribel (age 19) reported:

Like I'm thinking of going and finishing my high school. Like that's what I wish to do. Before being part of a community, I find that I didn't want to be bothered with it.

Conclusion

Young people from all four of these programmes were impacted through their participation in evaluation. Two benefits that stood out were youth seeing themselves as social change agents and increased feelings of programme ownership. However, both of these outcomes were contingent on the level of youth participation in the programme. It was when youth were active in defining both the programme practice and their evaluation processes that these desired outcomes were experienced.

On the other hand, regardless of the level and type of participation within the evaluation or the programme, all young people reported with great enthusiasm changes in relationships with adults and with other peers. The evaluation process created environments for people (young and old) to do something together, to create something new. They formed new relationships, and learned something about respect, difference, disagreement and negotiation.

The benefits of participation have typically been framed in terms of individual gain (i.e., skill development, empowerment, self-esteem building). However, the youth evaluators in these programmes identified the development of new and different types of relationships

as one of the major benefits of participation. In doing so, the young people in this study have shown us the relational nature of participation. A new understanding of participation as a relational activity is an important finding of this research. Perhaps Monica (age 17, evaluation of the juvenile justice system) put it most clearly:

It was cool we did a lot, we learned a lot, we're doing a lot of learning. A lot of learning about each other, about different environments, you know stuff like that. And we learn from both sides because we do have adults in there, so we're seeing it from both sides. You know, sometimes we agree, sometimes we disagree, but there is always a respectful way, you know what I'm saying?

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