

## **Where Are Young People in Youth Program Evaluation Research?**

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### **Abstract**

*This article is written from the perspective of program evaluation and addresses young people's participation in evaluations of programs meant to benefit them. The positive youth development paradigm and evaluation research with youth programs are potentially complementary, but the intersection of the two is still narrow. Some reasons are that young people are not always seen as assets to the field of evaluation research, the funding and activities of evaluation and youth development remain separate, and evaluators are pressed to meet the demands of "accountability" within limited timeframes. However, deeper and broader participation of youth in program evaluation could benefit both youth and evaluations, and we discuss some possible benefits in this article. We also reflect on what may happen in program evaluation as it moves in a more participatory direction. Finally, we suggest changes that will need to happen in program practice and evaluation in order for desired outcomes to take place.*

**Keywords:** [evaluation](#), [young people](#), [participatory research](#), [youth development](#)

## Living in the World of Program Evaluation

To introduce the context of program evaluation with youth, consider a typical scenario that we, and other evaluators, commonly encounter:

*You, the evaluator, are hired to evaluate "By Youth, For Youth," a youth development program that embraces a philosophy of youth as assets, and aims to provide opportunities for youth to expand their identities and skills through decision-making, leadership, and challenges to take on new roles. The goals of the evaluation are to measure whether youth benefit from the program and to establish how the program can be replicated in other locations. A large corporation is funding this evaluation, and while neither you nor the program particularly like the company's image, you accept its money in order to work with a program so dedicated to providing resources and services to at-risk youth in a community that generally does not value them or provide opportunities for their development.*

*While you are excited about how promising the program, the staff, and the youth involvement seem, and you see great possibilities for researching and disseminating what works (or does not), you unfortunately realize that you will encounter some problems:*

- *The funds available will only allow you or your staff to spend a few hours per week on the research, and you know you need more time to interact with the program and youth, collect data, and analyze your results.*
- *Most young people attend the program for a semester and some for a year. You know that past research shows that the kinds of results the funder expects to see, namely improved test scores, are unlikely to happen over such a short time.*
- *Realizing this, you immediately note that the outcomes to be achieved are not completely clear or agreed upon. The funder wants to know if young people who participate in this program fare better in school, so they want to see grades and test scores go up. On the other hand, the program staff believe in providing opportunities, so they want to see a program atmosphere that appreciates and supports youth and builds relationships. They hope to see more self-esteem and better choices made by the youth, as well as youth being leaders; their primary focus rests on providing opportunities. They also don't really expect grades and test scores to improve, because the quality of their school instruction is more important than the youth program in contributing to test performance.*

*Despite initial difficulties of implementing this evaluation research, the project commences smoothly as you form a relationship with the program provider and staff. They find that they like and trust you and realize that the evaluation could be a great opportunity to learn some lessons, as well as to show that they really do good things for young people. They want to cooperate, and they want feedback so they can learn how to do better.*

*Nonetheless, developing a fully participatory relationship in which the stakeholders "own" the evaluation is unlikely: they don't have the freedom to use the scarce funds to find out what they want to know—they have to show whether test scores go up. Plus, participating in research means taking on a new and alien role. To do that, the stakeholders need time not only to participate in the research, but also to observe and learn what it means to take on that role.*

*Another problem is that the program providers, and therefore staff, see the evaluation as something mandatory that may end up making them look bad to the funder and jeopardize continued funding. They know the evaluation may well show that test scores don't go up for many young people or even suggest other undesired outcomes. They are also under-budgeted (like everybody else) and use part-time or volunteer staff to work with the youth. Being asked to be responsible for tracking anything, however important, such as attendance, grades, attitudes, or family involvement is seen as an extreme burden. As expected, this is turning out to be a barrier to engaging program staff in the evaluation in a way that you had hoped.*

*As you're struggling to find the answer to these issues, you suddenly realize that you have yet to address the young people, whom the program actually serves. You point out to the program staff that since their program is about opportunities for youth participation, those opportunities should naturally extend to include youth in the evaluation. While the program staff didn't actually think of this (and you wonder why—perhaps because they believed it was part of your job), they agree wholeheartedly.*

*This leads to the next question: "How to do it?" Youth haven't been involved in setting the outcomes to be measured thus far, but it's not too late to ask them what they see as the goals of their involvement. What a surprise! They don't say better grades and test scores, they don't say "improved positive youth development," or greater self-esteem. They say their goals are to have fun, stay out of trouble, have great people they can talk to, and not be home "doing nothing."*

*You can tell right away the youth participants have a lot of insights about the importance of trusting relationships, self-expression, being creative, and of how the adults behave and think. The program staff start getting nervous because the young people may say things about them, or the program, that aren't very flattering.*

*Despite these initial issues, you also know that before you can expect youth to be engaged in the evaluation research, they (in addition to the staff) need to be trained and educated about the project. So you suggest incorporating a research component into the activities, but you quickly realize that this is unlikely to happen, owing to a number of logistical constraints (e.g., money, time).*

*As program evaluator you often find yourself in a bind. Depending on which stakeholder you speak with, you seem to be hearing different kinds of goals, and you're not sure how to work with all of them or whether you should focus on them all of the goals. Do you focus on the funder's request to examine academic improvement—test scores—at the risk that your evaluation may not show any improvement, or that insufficient evaluation resources will not allow you to do your best? Then you have placed demands on the program staff in terms of time and energy, without real participation in the research since most of that data can be easily extrapolated from school records, and you have proven that the staff were right to distrust evaluators! Or do you focus only on the outcomes that seem more important to the program staff, such as self-esteem and leadership? Doing so, you might uncover more interesting findings for the program and help improve the social world of the program and the young people. But if you decide to take this route, you've failed to address what the funder thinks is important (test scores), which might just as likely jeopardize funding as would bad results.*

This scenario is fictional but not at all unrealistic; it is based on our collective experiences and is intended to convey the complexities, and sometimes frustrations, that we encounter as program evaluators. In this article, we address the real world of formal program evaluation, focusing on evaluations concerned with the assessment and improvement of programs that serve young people.<sup>1</sup> We believe that the current state of formalized program evaluation is one that leaves insufficient room for involving young people, other than involving them as the subjects of research. This is unfortunate because greater youth involvement would help to both realize the ideals of positive youth development that these programs often hold and improve the validity of youth program evaluations by including an important group of stakeholders who are often missing from conversations in evaluation—the young people themselves. There are some places—though relatively few within the now-large profession of program evaluation—where young people are actively involved in defining and carrying out what we call formal program evaluation. We use the term “formal” to describe a practice that is now solidly established as a profession, where some of us are regarded as the professionals, but at the same time we also believe that the practice should engage the communities and individuals who are often the topics of evaluations. However, in our experience and for a number of reasons, it is usually difficult to involve young people in formal program evaluation.

Many of the programs we evaluate embrace a philosophy of what is now known as positive youth development, which we describe briefly below. While many of the principles of positive youth development could be achieved by involving young people more deeply in program evaluation, as well as other aspects of program planning, neither the field of program evaluation nor the field of program practice

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<sup>1</sup> We use the terms “youth” and “young people” to refer collectively to anyone who would typically be called “children” or “youth” in the relevant literature. We recognize that each of these terms may denote different age ranges, but we simply find it most convenient to cover all age ranges with these terms.

has reached a point where youth are included broadly (i.e., in most evaluations) or deeply (i.e., from the outset of the evaluation process and in ways that guide the process throughout). We therefore discuss some of the current realities of and beliefs about program evaluation that prevent greater youth involvement, and we present reasons why we believe greater youth involvement would benefit programs and evaluation processes by helping to achieve the goals of both. We also include some reflections on our own work in youth program evaluation and where there are possibilities to involve youth more fully. Finally, because current beliefs and structures make it so difficult to involve youth more broadly and deeply, we discuss what would be required and what program evaluations might look like if the transformation to youth participation in formal program evaluation were to occur more often and at a greater level.

This article is also based on some of our beliefs about youth program evaluation. First, we posit that involving young people in program evaluation is difficult because many of those who have a stake in program evaluation—evaluators, funders, program participants, and program staff—now probably regard evaluation research, at least to some degree, as an outside force with the power of “objectivity” (which is very evident in today’s discourse of results-based accountability—see below). It is also difficult because of the ways that young people are currently viewed within society, and because of the approaches that many youth programs currently take toward youth development. Second, we laud developments to date that have occurred as a result of a positive youth development philosophy, which values youth participation and the increasing focus on youth as assets to programs. Finally, before we present our views of the limitations and opportunities for youth participation in program evaluation, we should be clear about exactly what we mean. There are growing examples of young people conducting research, most often to learn about and highlight a need or injustice in their community (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2004). However, there are fewer examples, in the literature and in our experience, of young people as full participants in self-reflexive evaluation of initiatives that involve them. Below we further discuss what we mean by youth participation in program evaluation and how it relates (or does not relate) to youth programs themselves.

### **The Narrow Intersection of Program Evaluation and Youth Development**

A positive youth development philosophy, which provides a set of ideals from which to operate youth programs, has evolved over recent decades in response to earlier program models and rhetoric that qualified young people as risks or liabilities to be contained and corrected. Instead, according to the ideals of a positive youth development approach, young people possess assets that can benefit them and the world around them (e.g., see Camino and Zeldin 2002; Kirshner, O’Donoghue and McLaughlin 2002; Larson et al. 2003). At the same time, this approach suggests that young people also need support to help them discover all of their own capabilities and to reach their potential. Participation in research, program planning and implementation, and community activities can guide youth toward their own development while allowing them to make valuable contributions in each of these domains (see Camino and O’Connor 2005; Camino and Zeldin 2002; London 2000;

2002). However, youth participation opportunities more generally in research, practice, and policy continue to be rare, for reasons such as negative beliefs about adolescents, societal separations among age groups, or lack of legitimacy given to children's experiences (see Camino and Zeldin 2002; Grover 2004).<sup>2</sup>

Youth participation can be seen as a subsidiary of a positive youth development philosophy and practice; therefore, a participatory evaluation with youth "is simultaneously both a program development and a youth development method" (Sabo 1999, iv). In spite of this potential, many youth development programs that we encounter do not involve young people in program planning or implementation. It would be a logical extension of positive youth development for these programs to be more participatory at all levels. By the same token, a program cannot logically be participatory if it does not include youth participation in evaluation research, because the ideals of participatory program evaluation dictate that the results of the research feed back into a program's planning and implementation in order to continue to make the program better. In fact, youth participation in evaluation is where community development, action research, participatory evaluation, and positive youth development meet.

A program evaluation that includes youth participation is one in which young people who are served by the program—or perhaps who have some other stake, such as potential or past participants—help to: a) formulate research questions; b) decide on methods to be used to explore answers to those questions; c) implement the methods; d) derive results; and e) interpret and disseminate those results. "Evaluation" itself can mean many things, but we are specifically interested in young people playing more meaningful roles in assessing the implementation and effectiveness of the programs that serve them. This sort of involvement moves beyond the model of program evaluation that currently predominates. In our experience, even program evaluations that incorporate newer or more progressive research approaches are not fully participatory, because they do not meet all of the above criteria. In our evaluation research, we attempt to document the authentic voices of youth participants through focus groups, mapping, or other creative techniques, all of which are now used fairly often. Older youth may also prove themselves adept at tasks such as interviewing, entering data, or conducting analyses, and we have worked with high school interns assist in program evaluations in these ways. We make some attempts to explain the reasons behind each task and the broader evaluation context, but we still have not had the opportunity to train youth in program evaluation, whatever their relation to the program may be, and in our experiences in evaluation, youth have not yet been given the chance to take ownership of the process.

Engaging young people in activities such as focus groups, interviews, or collecting their own data adds value to program evaluation, but these activities might still be considered tokenistic because young people are not given a say in the topic, how it is being researched, or how the resulting information will be used (Hart 1992).

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<sup>2</sup> There are, however, many models for youth involvement in decision-making; cf. [Cahill and Hart, this issue](#)

Young people should also be granted the same “right of correction” as adults “when it comes to the stereotypes and negative images of the young and classes of the young that often emerge from social research” (Grover 2004, 82). We would also add that they should have opportunities for identifying important outcomes, conceptualizing research questions, carrying out research, presenting and disseminating results, and troubleshooting as problems arise. This argument about youth participation in research is no longer new, as the advantages and models of youth participation are by now well articulated. Young people need to have the investment, understanding, and empowerment to translate issues into questions, questions into methods, methods into results, and results into program operations. This is one of the underlying principles of participatory action research: that research should be relevant and directly applied to the social problems it addresses (Breitbart, this issue; Cahill, forthcoming; Cahill 2004; Cammarota, this issue; Chawla 2002; Driskell, this issue; Torre and Fine 2006; Youth Speak Out Coalition and Zimmerman, this issue).

What is still new is the wide application of a participatory model to program evaluation. There is currently a narrow intersection between youth program evaluation and youth participation, in part because of the still relatively small number of opportunities for youth participation in general, and because program evaluation now exists as its own formalized field of practice. Even while many of us within this field embrace ideals of participation and action, we also face a number of demands, such as deadlines to submit results and pressures to “prove” successes. These demands can compete with one another and with the desire to include program staff and youth participants.

### **The Tension between Accountability and Participation**

As we just discussed, evaluations concerned with youth programs, even programs that embrace the ideals of youth development, rarely involve young people in program evaluations in a genuinely participatory way. Because youth participation is currently not an implicit part of program evaluation, including young people is still felt to be an additional piece of the work, one requiring even more energy and thought (and, we should be clear, it does take work to prepare young people to be serious researchers). Young people are not necessarily seen as assets whose own energies and thoughts would make the work of evaluation easier; rather, their involvement is seen as making the work more complicated. The positive youth development programs that we evaluate often are not participatory at any other levels, so it would be difficult for us to impose a participatory model for program evaluation.

There are more reasons why it is difficult to involve youth fully in program evaluation; as professional evaluators, we often need to meet the demands of “accountability” that funders now increasingly require. As London (2002, 2) explains, separate funding streams—one for youth development programming, the other for research and evaluation of the programs—make it difficult to “define a region of theory and practice, which values both the rigor of the *products* of the inquiry and the empowerment *process* experienced by its participants.” Products and processes are still seen as separate from one another, what London calls a

“fundamental point of contention” within the evaluation field. For example, consider a current national fund to support academic and developmental outcomes for young people through out-of-school time activities, and one that funds several of the programs we currently evaluate. The fund, which exists as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, provides support for both programming and evaluation. However, few reports of those evaluations to date make any mention of youth involvement in the conception, implementation, or interpretation of program evaluation research. There are some exceptions, such as Portola New Directions in California, which hired youth for a program needs assessment and evaluation (see Horsch et al. 2002), but more often young people are involved primarily as the research subjects and not in other ways.

The current trend in out-of-school time programming is part of a longer history of youth programming. After-school programs have existed in the United States for more than a century, until recently primarily as custodial care (i.e., for “latchkey children”), which might sometimes also include additional charity, for example in the form of health care or tutoring. More recently, after-school programs have begun to proliferate and continue to provide safe havens from the streets or the isolation of being home alone, but they now also meet a demand to promote pro-social behaviors, emotional development, and academic achievement. In addition to growing sophistication in providing services as per these demands, the current generation of youth programs has also received increasing funds from the federal government and national foundations, and along with those funds an increasing pressure of accountability to their funders—in other words, to prove that they are accomplishing the current set of goals that are expected of these programs (see Bodilly and Beckett 2005).

The field of evaluation has likewise evolved—and continues to evolve—to find ways to measure and report program goals, which evaluators hope will be used to help programs perform better in their work with youth. Evaluations may also form the basis for decisions on funding programs, because they offer the “proof” that programs are in fact performing according to today’s expectations, which programs may also hold for themselves. Furthermore, alongside a growing understanding of and desire to document youth development, there is a persistent anxiety over the academic successes of young people and the capabilities of the schools and programs where they spend their time. The result is that evaluators are pressed to respond to the demands of “accountability” to academic standards, within the limitations of evaluation research.

Therefore, current youth program evaluations attempt to codify program outcomes, for example as measured through standardized test scores, behaviors as rated by adults (such as teachers or counselors), or developmental indicators as reported by adults or young people’s self reports, often using the familiar Likert-type numeric scales (for a comprehensive description of methods currently used, see Bouffard and Little 2004). The technical training required to implement these methods and the time demands of evaluations add to the difficulty of more meaningfully including youth program participants in the evaluation process, especially because the funding for evaluation falls into a separate compartment from other program



activities. Evaluators usually do not have the time and space that would be required to pass on the requisite skills that youth participants might need in order to carry out program evaluations well. Program staff might also need to be more closely involved and gain the level of skill needed to support young people in doing evaluation research, but involving staff carries its own set of challenges, such as trust in evaluators and commitment to the research.

Program evaluations are increasingly complicated and changing to keep pace of new expectations of programs. It is still commonly held that evaluations would not be valid if the subjects being evaluated were guiding the research process, and the subjects here include the individual students as well as the programs, so there is also an ideological level of tension in conducting program evaluation in a participatory way. Participatory action research has a contested history in the United States, one that reaches at least as far back as Jane Addams and other community-based researchers, whose work in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century challenged the authority of the academy to articulate the “truth” about poor communities, their strengths, and their needs (Sabo 2003). Where young people are involved in research, their involvement may pose even more of a challenge to what is seen as “real” or valid and valuable research, and it does not immediately seem to fit into a positivistic tradition (for example, because of beliefs that research “subjects” involvement in doing research would occlude objectivity). Participatory research in general, whether or not it includes young people, presents challenges to the predominant model of professionalized program evaluation research.

### **Potential Benefits of Youth Participation in Program Evaluation**

If youth programs were more deeply participatory and youth were involved more broadly, evaluations could be beneficial not just for the youth themselves but also for the field of program evaluation. As we have said, the practice and philosophy of positive youth development points to the attributes of youth participation, which may include participation in government, community-based projects, school or program planning, and research. A positive youth development approach views youth as assets, fully capable of informing the issues and institutions that impact their lives. Deeper, more meaningful participation also implies emotional, intellectual, and developmental gains to be had for young people. We discuss potential benefits in this section.

### **Benefits to Young People**

A participatory approach values youth collaboration and leadership in the research process. Participatory action research, or PAR, can provide a model to apply toward youth collaboration and leadership in program evaluation research. PAR is concerned with the process of change through research, rather than research outcomes only. A part of this process, and one of the primary goals of PAR, is that researchers gain a thorough understanding of the situation they are studying in order to change it. Because some of the researchers are also individuals who are living the situation being studied, in this case young people participating in youth programs, awareness of one’s circumstances and possibilities for changing it can lead to empowerment (Grover 2004; Nieuwenhuys 2004). This follows Paolo Freire’s concept of “conscientization” (Hart 1997; Nieuwenhuys 2004). In the case

of program evaluation, the most direct and immediate set of outcomes from youth involvement would be the identification of relevant program areas to address (London, Zimmerman and Erbstein, forthcoming). A less direct or more long-term, but perhaps more powerful, result could be the internalized sense that youth program participants can have an effect on changes in their programs, and therefore possibly affect changes in their communities and their own lives.

There is also transformative potential for young people who are involved in evaluation research, especially at places in their development when important developmental tasks include trying on different roles and stretching their abilities (Camino and Zeldin 2002; Camino and O'Connor 2005; Horsch et al. 2002; Lewis-Chap et al. 2003; London 2002; Zeldin et al. 2000). A Vygotskyian framework can be applied to help understand the role that youth participation may play in development (Brice Heath 2000; Sabo 2003). Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the zone of proximal development suggests that learning occurs in supportive, social situations, where an individual is challenged to reach the upper limits of his or her behavioral and cognitive capabilities; the lower limit is what someone might achieve on her or his own without any social interaction. Internalization of language plays an important role, as learning occurs first between people, or interpsychologically, and secondly within the person, or intrapsychologically. In other words, for learning to occur, we must first talk through ideas or problems with other people and then internalize what we have learned. According to a Vygotskyian framework for development, young people become more than they already are when they have opportunities to "play" at being someone else "who they are not," which is exactly what happens when they are involved in the tasks that are required by participatory involvement in research (Sabo 2003). Observing and then enacting roles of designing, negotiating, strategizing, and creating within programs are ways of performing and channeling young people's desires to do something important and to challenge norms (Brice Heath 2000).

### **Benefits to Evaluations**

From a perspective of youth development and participation, *not* involving young people as researchers constitutes a missed opportunity for evaluation research. Because a positive youth development philosophy embraces young people as assets, when the young people who participate in programs are not at the table discussing evaluation, the program misses out on the skills, knowledge, and energy that they can provide, and program evaluations are likewise incomplete without their input (Conway Kohler 1983; Horsch et al. 2002; London and Young 2003). Young people are also less likely to feel a sense of ownership in the evaluation when they have only superficial involvement or none at all, for example when they are asked to complete paper and pencil measures that do not reflect the questions or problems that they feel are most relevant to program participation. One of the challenges that we face right now in evaluating youth programs is a lack of interest and investment on the part of the young people who participate. This is probably because we are imposing research activities on them, based on questions and methods that others have identified in order to meet the demands of the evaluations. If young people are involved in identifying and framing problem(s) to

be evaluated, then they are more likely to be interested in investigating possible solutions.

A participatory approach to research also encourages trust, dialogue, and the exchange of knowledge among researchers and those who would ordinarily be the subjects of research (Chesler 1991). The rhetoric of "accountability" to which we often have to respond, and its ideological and historical roots, continue to challenge the validity of participatory approaches. However, proponents of youth participation in evaluation argue that if there is any loss in presumed "objectivity," the return is that "one gains many-fold in reliability of data" (see London, Zimmerman and Erbstein, forthcoming). Young people who have an immediate or potential stake in youth programs have the most intimate knowledge about those programs and their communities, and therefore should be thought of as some of the most likely candidates to conduct program evaluations. On the other hand, we acknowledge that it is a valid concern that all researchers, youth and adult, bring bias to any research endeavor. In program evaluation, it is important to ask whether participants in the evaluation have other roles in which they are invested that can compromise their perceptions about the effectiveness of a project. For example, if a young person is serving as a mentor to younger children in a program and also participates in the evaluation, that person would not be a reliable person to ask "are mentors doing a good job?" She or he *would* be a great person to assist in defining characteristics of mentoring, and providing insight into the challenges and rewards of the situation.

While there currently appears to be a dichotomy between participatory research approaches and stringent evaluations of youth programs, we hold that the dichotomy is an artificial construct created by systemic conditions in youth programs, the ways that young people are viewed more generally, and long-standing beliefs about social science research. Yet there is tremendous potential for the two to converge in creative and productive ways. We value participatory approaches and professionalized evaluation research equally, and we are excited to see the development of new possibilities for bringing the two strands together in new and creative ways. We reflect below on our experiences in program evaluation and what they imply for involving youth more broadly and deeply.

### **Reflections on Youth Involvement in Program Evaluation Research**

In spite of the limitations and obstacles to involving young people in formal program evaluation, there are examples of direct and meaningful youth involvement in community evaluation research (for example, see reviews by Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2002; London 2002; Sabo 2003). There is also promise within existing practices in the worlds of positive youth development programs and of evaluation, which point to possibilities to move toward deeper youth involvement in formal program evaluation. In this section, we present thoughts about what may happen in program evaluation as it moves in a more participatory direction. However, we also want to reiterate that involving youth in program evaluation should not be thought of as something that will always happen easily or automatically, and it requires the dedication, thought, and energy of people who have the expertise needed to make youth participation meaningful and

strong. We therefore also reflect in this section on some of the things that we think might pose challenges or require additional attention.

### **Theory-Driven Evaluation**

In our evaluation work, we use a “theory of change” approach (see Connell and Kubisch 1998; Weiss 1995), not a theory in itself but in fact a planning and evaluation methodology where stakeholders identify their long-term goal, and then work backwards to identify what is needed to achieve that goal.<sup>3</sup> Most often, this means that there will be many short-term goals and sets of activities that will be necessary before the long-term goal can be reached. The “theory” requires that all of these be identified, and that all stakeholders discuss, maybe argue about and explain *why* these shorter-term goals and activities are likely to lead to the ultimate long-term goal. A theory of change approach asks that participants articulate their justifications for one goal leading to another, in addition to various activities or interventions needed to help reach goals.

Using a theory of change approach that explicitly involves all stakeholders from the outset of an evaluation can help get youth involved in a way that allows them to express their goals for a project and to hear what others think. If young people are not clear about what the program’s goals are for them, or if the different stakeholders do not agree on the goals and how to achieve them, then the possibilities for meaningful involvement in evaluation, or for a meaningful evaluation to take place at all, are undermined (remember the scenario presented earlier). However, if the young people—the targeted recipients of a program’s services—understand the intended objectives, and understand that they might have different ideas than others about the importance of the program, then they will be in a better position to start formulating relevant research questions. In fact, that will be the case for everyone involved; therefore, we also believe that adults involved in a program need to participate in evaluation in order for young people to effectively participate.

### **Developing Relationships**

Working with youth as participants in program evaluation requires more than just research skills. Evaluators have to be aware of, and become good at, their role as facilitators and mentors. In addition to being psychologically open, patient, and reflective of their own preconceptions, adults also need to have at least some of the skills that will be transmitted to young people through modeling, trial and error, or discussion of curricula that may need to be evaluated and adapted. After all, the skills needed for good program evaluation do require intensive training, and being able to conduct an evaluation does not automatically mean being able to teach. A recent interviewee commented that high school students have good ideas, but those ideas tend to be broad, such as “I’m interested in racism.” A facilitator—adult or peer—then needs to have some understanding and ability to guide the general research topic into specific research questions, and to do it without co-opting the process for their own purposes or interests. This kind of facilitation requires skills and creativity, the cultivation of which proves challenging across settings and from

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<sup>3</sup> Also see the Theory of Change website: [www.theoryofchange.org](http://www.theoryofchange.org).

kindergarten classrooms through graduate seminars. Outside evaluators need to be able to transmit those skills to young people, as well as to the adults who work with them every day, in order for evaluation to become built into program models.

Dialogue about young people has shifted in recent decades away from “risk” toward “assets” and support for development, but common perceptions of young people have not always kept up with the professional discourse. For example, adults still believe that adolescence is a time of “storm and stress,” that youth are not capable of engaging in the very civic functions in which they are already engaging, and that their cognitive abilities are similar to those of children while they are at the same time less prosocial than younger children (see Camino and Zeldin 2002). Likewise, the professional discourse does not necessarily reflect all of the ways that individual adult professionals think and behave toward the young people with whom they work. While our hearts might always be in the right place, we do not always have the presence of mind or the wherewithal to act on the ideals that we read, write, and speak. Often, the programs that we evaluate are hierarchical, with a top-down structure from organization and program directors, through staff who work directly with young people, to the young people themselves. As facilitators, we therefore also play the role of paying attention to other imbalances of power among the groups we are facilitating, such as relationships between youth and adult program staff or relationships among adult staff.

Formalized evaluation conducted by professional evaluators always involves relationships of power. While evaluators can address power differentials by taking a participatory or community-based approach, they cannot always balance out unequal relationships. Simply being adults also places evaluators in a role of power in relation to younger people, and age among young people grants them symbolic power as well (think of the relationships among young people within the school system’s class/grade structure). Further, there are possible power differentials among subgroups that reflect those of larger societal groups, such as class, race, and gender (and it is not always boys who will be most vocal or dominant). We should look to young people, who may see and feel the imbalances of power that are invisible to us as adults and as professional evaluators. They might help us devise strategies that address all of the imbalances of power within a program, all of which they ultimately feel, directly or indirectly.

### **Applying the Tools of Formal Evaluation**

At a symposium on youth participation in community evaluation research described by Checkoway, Dobbie, and Richards-Schuster (2003), questions were raised about so-called scientific methods and their appropriateness for youth researchers. In today’s program evaluation climate, scientific rigor can be conflated with the exclusive use of quantitative methods, although this is changing (e.g., through the wider use of focus groups). All evaluation methods require training and time to develop, but there may be confusion or resistance toward incorporating more technically complex methods into participatory evaluation research with young people or adults. However, we argue that developmental appropriateness and scientific rigor need not be mutually exclusive.

As evaluators, we may also unintentionally find ourselves working under the assumption that non-professionals, no matter their age, are less capable than professionals of using some of the “harder” tools of social science research, such as quantitative instrument construction and analysis. Often the “softer” qualitative tools are employed when doing participatory research, because those tools are assumed to be easier to teach and use, but that assumption may limit the possibilities of any piece of research. We do not subscribe to the qualitative/quantitative divide, but instead believe the choice of methods should depend on the research questions that are being pursued. If a research team that happens to include young people decides, for example, that validated quantitative scales are in fact appropriate for what they want to measure, then next steps may include training young researchers in constructing, administering, and analyzing that type of quantitative data. Likewise, if focus groups seem to be the best choice to answer a set of research questions, individuals who will facilitate the focus groups should be well prepared to do so. When involving youth as researchers, a wide variety of tools should be available.

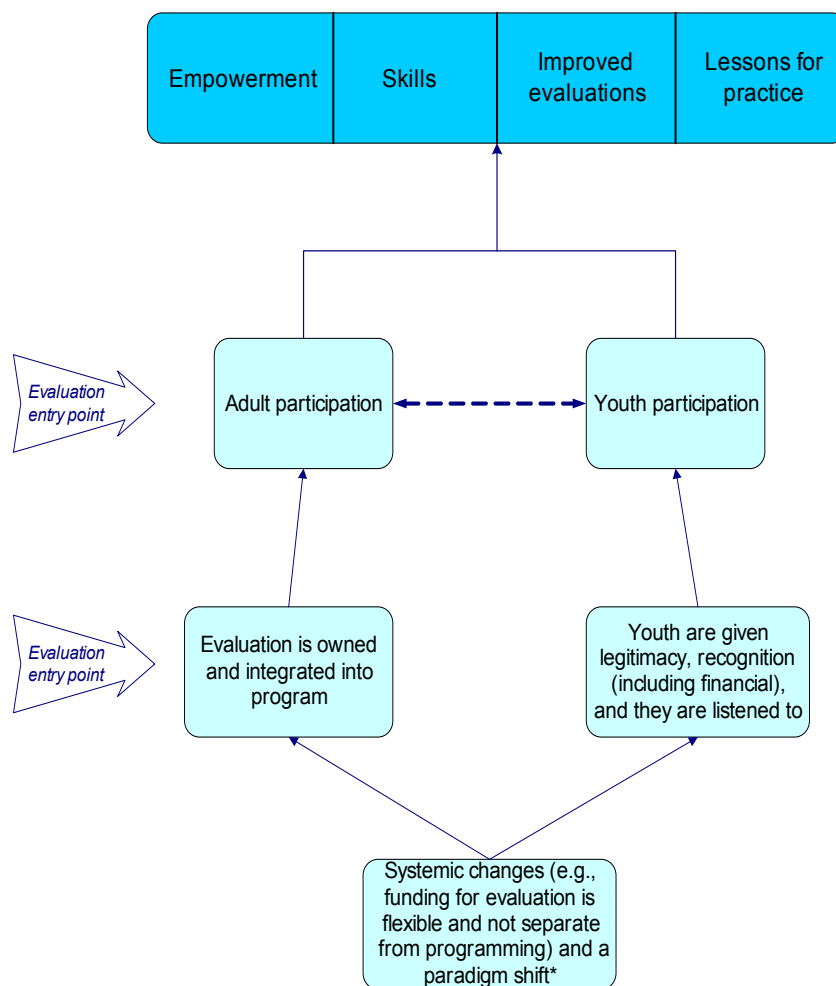
A tension between scientific rigor and meaningful inclusion exists in all participatory research, with youth or adults. Where young people are involved, that tension may increase because researchers are also obligated to be sensitive to young people’s abilities, based on their developmental maturity. Differing developmental abilities should not be an excuse for not including young people in meaningful ways; that would be a denial of their right to participate. A Vygotskian approach suggests that young people are capable of learning to tackle unexpected challenges when given adequate scaffolding through their environments, and at the same time suggests that adults should respect the limitations of young people’s abilities. With support from professional evaluators, young people can learn skills such as conducting focus groups and interviews, or applying statistical analyses to quantitative data sets. High school students might in fact be learning some of these skills in their classes or out-of-school activities, as we have experienced. However, as our experience has also shown, barriers exist in terms of the time, commitment, and resources to involving young people in ways that allow them to make serious contributions to program evaluation research. Several things first need to change.

### **What Needs to Change?**

What we are proposing here requires not only major changes to program evaluation techniques, but also more systemic changes in program planning and operation, and the larger field of evaluation. Adequate funding and other resources, such as time and expertise, are necessary to ensure that program evaluations can engage youth participants in meaningful ways, but they are not sufficient. More importantly, routine youth involvement in formal evaluation research would require a paradigm shift. In addition to the practical limitations that we have already suggested, youth-driven participatory research of any kind still goes against the current grain, and so does involving young people in research projects beyond classrooms or clubs. Where young people are involved as researchers, the common beliefs about non-professionals as researchers are also compounded with societal beliefs about young people being less capable than older people in intellectual endeavors. The potential power of youth-involved research is that it can begin to

shift the paradigm of professionalized research, professionalized work with young people, and perhaps of young people's place in society (Hart 1997).

**Figure 1. Youth participation in program evaluation research: A model for change**



\*With the status quo, evaluation with youth participation can still take place at the "evaluation entry points," but without bigger changes, we believe that it will always be difficult to sustain youth participation and to make it truly meaningful.

Figure 1 illustrates our proposed model for change to fully involve youth in program evaluation, which would in turn lead to empowerment, acquisition of skills, improved evaluations, and lessons for program practice. We feel that adult and youth participation are *both* required for these outcomes to be achieved, and at the same time adults and youth set examples for and encourage one another to participate. Adults should feel a sense of ownership, and evaluation should be integrated into the program. Young people need to be seen as legitimate persons

who are capable of doing meaningful work (which includes compensation), and they need to be heard.

Systemic changes are ultimately needed if true participation in program evaluation is to occur, including integrated funding. Greater youth involvement would mean a change in prevailing beliefs about research, specifically program evaluation research, and about youth and community involvement in that research. It would also mean a change in beliefs about youth programs, which would be seen not just as places that serve youth but also as places to find the most logical resources to carry out the work of evaluation—*young people themselves*. Lastly, and perhaps above all, current beliefs about young people would shift, so that they become viewed less as “young” and more as “people” with a range of abilities and potential contributions, not just to evaluation work in particular, but also more generally to the construction of knowledge about the world. Positive youth development researchers and practitioners have been working actively for more than a decade to shift the ways that youth are viewed in the U.S., so again youth participation in positive youth development program evaluation is a logical fit (Benson 1997; Damon 2002; Lerner 2002).

Of course, it is possible for participatory evaluation to occur in the meantime, at the “entry points” illustrated in Figure 1. Adults or young people might be engaged in evaluation without other preconditions (ownership, integration, systemic change) having been met, but they might only be involved tangentially, may not be able to contribute fully, or may feel coerced. If the conditions of ownership, integration, and legitimacy are met, participation may occur in a smoother and more meaningful way, but eventually we would expect difficulties such as financial constraints, burnout, or lack of continuity in participation.

Likewise, evaluation results are not likely to lead to program change without deeper and wider youth participation. Research suggests that programs themselves will also have to be participatory in order for participation in program evaluation to lead to program changes. This may also be part of the paradigm shift—*more youth participation in all aspects of youth programming*. For example, Kim Sabo (1999) found different patterns in youth participation in program evaluation. At the least participatory level, where program environments were neither participatory nor democratic, programs resisted participatory evaluation, and evaluation findings did not lead to program changes. Students might have been able to monitor their own group projects, and there were positive outcomes for young people in terms of decision-making and relationships, but young people still had no say in program practice. At the more participatory level, programs were able to bring in an outside expert to support them in implementing an empowerment evaluation, they incorporated evaluation into program design and practice, and they responded to evaluation findings by making change.

## **Conclusion**

Looking at program evaluation from the vantage point of the youth participation movement, it may seem as if young people’s involvement is quite common. Some of what is written from the perspective of those who are involved closely with youth



participation activities characterizes youth involvement in evaluation and other types of research as a strong and widespread presence (c.f., Delgado 2006). However, as others have noted, the field of youth participation in evaluation research “remains relatively undeveloped as a field of practice and subject of study” (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2002, 7).

While we do agree that youth participation in research, and specifically in program evaluation, are emerging subfields with great potential, we also believe that youth programming and program evaluation both have a long way to go toward the state of youth involvement that many of us would like to see. We therefore caution that a close-up perspective on youth participation may result in a different picture than what is seen by professional evaluators. First, it simply has not been our experience that youth participation in programs (other than as recipients of services) is common, widely accepted, or something that fits easily into evaluation. Second, things that are written about youth evaluation sometimes lump different types of research together, such as action research, community based participatory research, and participatory evaluation. Including many different things under the heading “evaluation” may make it seem as if youth participation in program evaluations is more widespread than it really is. For example, there may be special programs, such as Youth in Focus (see London 2000), or small school-based or program-based projects that investigate community issues, but these do not necessarily involve evaluation of youth programs themselves. “Evaluation” can also mean different things, such as an assessment of community needs or of the effectiveness of a consumer-driven organization, which may also contribute toward a picture of greater youth involvement. However, we are specifically talking about young people having more meaningful roles in evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of the programs that serve them, which does not happen as often as it could or should. Once we understand what gets in the way of this kind of participation, we can begin to think about how to involve young people more fully.

This article is the result of many conversations we, the authors, have had about our practice of evaluating programs for young people. Through our reflections, we have presented our view of where the field of youth evaluation is now and explored some ideas of where the field could be. While participatory approaches and methods offer a viable framework for evaluations involving youth, we would like to emphasize that the process of evaluation itself needs to change first. We particularly refer back to the issues associated with the different sources of program funding and the problem that the goals of evaluations are not always set by all of the stakeholders the program involves. If evaluations continue to be viewed as a burden and a mandatory part of receiving funding, as they are now, then we cannot expect anything to change. However, if young people become more fully involved in youth program evaluation work, then positive changes can occur in the culture of evaluation research, in the ways that young people use and understand evaluation research, and in the ways that adults and programs view young people (Goodyear 2003).

If programs begin to recognize the fact that change can occur from the inside by involving youth more actively in the evaluation design and process, then

evaluations can begin to take a more participatory approach and help change programmatic processes. In our proposed model for evaluation involving youth, we ask youth to step into the role of researchers and researchers to step into the role of facilitators. Doing so, of course, requires the professional guidance of researchers that we have already mentioned, but that professional guidance is currently considered to be additional work in formal program evaluation. Young people are not yet truly seen as assets to, or an automatic part of, program evaluation, and their energies and thoughts are commonly perceived to make the work more complicated, rather than easier or more relevant. Although we agree that it would take more time and resources to create a participatory research process with youth, the potential benefits to the research and stakeholders justify the extra effort. Benefits can be expected for young people, programs, and their evaluations, but obstacles should also be anticipated (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2002).

Because youth involvement in the field of program evaluation is so new, we do not believe that this article presents an exhaustive overview of the state of the field, nor is it a comprehensive set of ideas on the topic. Growth is taking place within the areas of positive youth development, youth participation, and participatory or community-based approaches to evaluation and research, all of which will help shape youth involvement in program evaluation. We hope that we have stimulated continued discussion and experimentation with involving young people, even if little by little, in evaluations of the programs that serve them. Perhaps it will not be long before these thoughts seem outdated, if the fields of positive youth development and youth program evaluation continue to evolve in the directions that we hope to see.

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