

**Youth Involvement in Community Research and Evaluation:
Mapping the Field**

Draft Discussion Paper

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For:

The Wingspread Symposium on
Youth Involvement in Community Research and Evaluation

June 7-9, 2002
Racine Wisconsin

INTRODUCTION

The role of young people in research and evaluation is entering an exciting period of expansion, change, and uncertainty. Initiatives from around the country are emerging in which youth are playing leadership roles in the generation and application of knowledge aimed toward the improvement of the programs, institutions, and community contexts that affect their lives and those of their peers. Terms such as youth mapping, youth-led research, evaluation and planning, youth civic engagement, youth leadership, and youth organizing are becoming common in community centers, foundation boardrooms, and university halls. What has brought such a broad range of players onto the same field at the same time? What is the game here, and what is at stake?

This paper is an attempt to map out the emerging field of youth involvement in research and evaluation. It is not a comprehensive historical overview (this task is for another generation to look back at us), and it is not a definitive statement about the status or direction of the field (this will require someone less entranced by questions, and more set on answers than I). Instead, this is a sketch map, providing a framework and roughing in some of the key landmarks (themselves more dilemmas than solid features). By surfacing some of the points of contention in the field, I hope to open a dialogue on the its possibilities, and to suggest some pathways through this new world terrain.

CONCEPTUAL AND HISTORICAL BASES OF YOUTH-LED EVALUATION

Youth-led evaluation can be understood as the convergence of two broad streams of theory and practice. One stream derives from the field of youth development, and represents an extension of youth development principles into the realms of research and evaluation. The other stream arises from the fields of research and evaluation, and represents an extension of their participatory -oriented dimensions to include youth as researchers/evaluators. Together, these two fields define a region of theory and practice, which values both the rigor of the *products* of the inquiry and the empowerment *processes* experienced by its participants. While youth-led evaluation can be seen as having deep historical roots, it is only in the last decade that it has begun to emerge as a field in its own right. While a full treatment of these historical roots and contemporary manifestations is beyond the scope of this article, a brief outline of this intellectual framework is provided [here](#).

From the field of youth development, youth-led evaluation incorporates the notion of youth as resources (as opposed to problems) (National Crime Prevention Council 1990), and as works in progress (as opposed to risks) (Pittman and Zeldin 1993), a value on youth leadership and agency (Kurth-Schai 1988, Zeldin and Camino 1999), the casting of youth as community builders (Checkoway and Finn 1992), and the notion of creating contexts with enabling supports and opportunities (McLaughlin, Irby and Langman 1993, Connell and Gambone 1999). Works such as Ginwright and Cammarota (forthcoming) and Camino (1992) focus on the ways that historical and institutional racism and classism present unique challenges for low-income youth and youth of color, and thus require innovative and progressive approaches to support their development and empowerment. Defining another edge of youth development are those concerned with youth as actors in social change, and the nexus with community organizing and activism (James and McGillicuddy 2001).

In the pre-history of youth development, the foundation laid by pragmatic philosopher John Dewey (1938) emphasizes the fundamental value on experiential learning. Dewey's notions have influenced numerous trends in the current youth leadership development field, most notably experiential education and service learning. In these related forms, youth develop their leadership capacities by engaging in real-world leadership contexts as change agents and decision-makers (Carver 1997, 1998).

On the adjacent flank, youth-led evaluation is shaped by the traditions of participatory research, evaluation, and planning. Participatory action research (PAR), reframes the typical dichotomies between researcher and subject and between research and action (Hall 1992; Vio Grossi 1981). It casts research and evaluation as democratic processes working to empower participants – especially the least powerful – to act as informed actors in improving their lives and effecting social change. As part of this progressive tradition, youth-led research and evaluation re-positions youth from passive subjects of inquiry to decision makers about what topics and questions are to be studied, and to what (and whose) benefit this knowledge will be directed. Youth-led research and evaluation seeks both to generate knowledge useful for the well being of youth, and to provide opportunities for empowerment of the youth participants (Center for Community Research 2001).

Principle inspirations in participatory research include the action research of Miles Horton and the Highlander Center (Adams with Horton 1975), popular education and the notion of *consciencização* (developing a critical awareness and agency) from Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970, 1994) McLaren and Leonard (1993). the later field-defining work of ethnographer William Foote Whyte (1991) in participatory action research, feminist critiques of the power inherent in the act of research (Wolf 1996), Said (1987) on raising subaltern voices, farmer and forest-dweller research, predominately from South and Southeast Asia (Poffenberger 1990, Western and Wright), community-based oral histories – especially with indigenous cultures (Palmer, 1991), and teachers as classroom researchers (Little and McLaughlin 1993). These foundational sources have been applied to the practices of youth ethnographers (Heath and McLaughlin 1993; Shaw 1996, Matsysik 2000), and youth asset mapping by the organizations such as the Search Institute (2001).

Participatory planning has contributed the notion of planning of, by, and for the people. This has had a range of manifestations from Davidoff's (1967) advocacy planning in the politicized urban atmosphere of the 1960s, to Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (1979) to Hester's participatory landscape and neighborhood design processes (1990, 1984), to the specialized field of children's educational and play environments (Moore 1986, 1973, R. Harte 1992, 1997).

Finally, the notions of empowerment evaluation, popularized by David Fetterman (2001), the practices of participatory health assessment (Wallerstein 1988, 1999, 2000), as well as more recent innovations by practitioners such as Kim Sabo (forthcoming), Youth In Focus (Zimmerman and Erbstein 1999, London 2000, Zimmerman and London, forthcoming) and others (Smith 2001, Horsch et al., 2002; Checkoway and Goodyear, forthcoming) are defining a new branch of the evaluation field.

Together, these historical and conceptual influences describe a field of practice in which youth simultaneously exercise and develop their leadership capacities through serving as leaders in producing valuable knowledge through a research and/or evaluation

process. The next section of the paper will explore a set of “turning points” or areas in which those in the field are engaged in a dialogue (and even argument) within themselves as they wrestle with the complex conceptual legacy summarized above.

TURNING POINTS

Perhaps the fundamental point of contention within the field of youth involvement in research and evaluation involves the relationship between its two identities: the first as a *process* of youth leadership development, and the second as a means to *produce* useful knowledge (research and evaluation reports). I use the psychological terms “relationship” and “identities” purposefully to emphasize that the task is not to optimize the balance between the two, but to imagine a body of thought and practice in which both elements are integrated in a healthy way. At the same time, it is important to note that these elements exist in a state of dynamism, sometimes supportive and complementary, sometimes contradictory and divisive, always seeking balance, but always shifting. The ways in which these two elements of process and product are held within a project, an organization, or the field has significant implications for both the experiences/developmental outcomes of the youth participants; the kinds, qualities, and utility of knowledge they generate. This section will trace the dynamics of these elements as they play out in several arenas: Youth Development, Organizational Development, and Community Development.

Youth Development

The first issue related to youth development concerns the very name of the field: what does “youth involvement” mean? How are youth involved in research and evaluation: as subjects? agents? leaders? The question of youth involvement can be framed as a “ladder” or a continuum ranging from the most passive (and even manipulated) rung to the most active and empowered.¹ Levels of youth involvement can be charted by their scope – how many of the research and evaluation steps they make decisions on, and by their scale – how full or deep is their decision-making authority? In some cases, youth may have a limited scope of involvement (e.g., only creating the data collection instruments) but a deep scale of leadership (e.g., they have exclusive say over the wording of the survey). In other cases, youth may have a broad scope of involvement (participating in all of the research process) but a more limited scale (e.g., informal advisory versus decision-making roles). These two variables make it more difficult to create a linear continuum from low to high involvement, and instead a web of possibilities across a broad gradient.

While it is clear that none of the participants in the field advocate the “lower” rungs, there is not consensus (nor do I advocate that there should be) on where the field should locate itself on this continuum. What is important to consider are the implications of each level of youth involvement, both for the youth experience and for the final product. In general, the further along the continuum towards full youth leadership the more empowering the experience and the more youth-centered/ youth-informed the data,

analysis and recommendations will be. However, there are some important discontinuities and non-linear qualities to the system.

First, for either of the two potential outcomes to be realized (youth empowerment and project quality) there must be an appropriate match between the leadership and skill capacity of the youth (and the staff and the organization – but more on that later) and the leadership level they are set to play. Without this match, the youth may be set up for failure, or at least frustration. At the same time, such concern for matching capacity to leadership level should be balanced with the understanding of leadership development being a process of reaching and growing beyond one's current condition in the direction of one's aspirations. That is, the question is not only : where are the youth now? but where might they be going, and how can this process help them on their way?

In addition to matching youth capacities to leadership levels, there must be an appropriate match between the project context of the youth leadership levels. Contextual factors include the history of the project (perhaps it already been initiated, and thus cannot possibly involve youth in the full scale of the project), the issue focus (e.g., a topic of limited relevance to youth), sensitive factors (a topic that demands strict confidentiality), and resources (e.g., limited funds to pay or to coordinate the youth team). (The broader issue of organizational capacity to support youth leadership will be considered below). Each of these factors needs to be questions as to its implications for appropriate level of youth leadership in a research or evaluation process.

Related to level of leadership is the challenge of access to the opportunities of research and evaluation for those youth and communities that whose voices have been historically marginalized or silenced. This is critical both because of the basic dedication to social justice at the core of the field, and because involvement in research and evaluation can serve as powerful means to intervene in prevailing power relations and to amplify the voices of those otherwise deferred and denied. Such values and perspectives come with significant commitments that sufficient financial, informational and skill-building, and other supportive resources will be directed to low-income and communities of color to enable them to engage in such processes. Training methods, program structures, and the cultural competencies of staff that will respond to and support low-income and youth of color through a research or evaluation process are crucial.

One of the basic assumptions of youth involvement in research and evaluation is that there is a value (again, both in terms of process and product) of having researcher closer to the topic and subjects, that is, a researcher with "local knowledge." However, this raises the question of, how local is local enough? For example, in evaluating youth programs at a community center, should be youth team be drawn from the specific programs being evaluated: can they be drawn from the broader constituency served by the center, or could they function as an "at-large" team drawn from the broader community and evaluating multiple organizations? Similarly, should youth researchers engage in research on youth programs and issues (e.g., education, gangs, drug use, teen pregnancy), or is there also a value in their perspective on issues that are not explicitly youth issues (e.g., transportation, affordable housing, senior services). Perhaps it is not even useful to make this distinction between youth and non-youth issues, because sooner or later all issues are youth issues, and even in the present moment, youth are arguably affected in some way by all social issues.

Organizational Development

Embedded, but not always explicit, within the practices of youth involvement in research and evaluation is a relationship between youth and adults. Even in the context of youth-led research and evaluation, adults are stakeholders (whether as staff, organizational leaders, funders, or policy makers) within the broader arena of the project. More broadly, youth development and youth leadership processes occurs within the context of a vast array of institutions (schools, courts, social services, health care and so on) that are primarily shaped and regulated by adults. These youth-adult relationships and institutional contexts vary in their degree of supportive for positive youth development and leadership. Therefore, it is critical that any analysis of youth involvement in research and evaluation query the youth-adult relationships and institutional contexts in which these activities occur. This section will examine two issues related to organizational context for youth involvement in research and evaluation: youth-adult partnerships, and organizational capacity.

Youth-adult partnerships can be viewed as a factor of staff capacity to successfully facilitate a youth-driven research or evaluation project, and as a dynamic between adult-driven and youth-driven components of a larger research or evaluation. In introducing youth-led research, evaluation and training, we typically are greeted by some nervous laughter when we state that one of the hardest part of the work is not the youth development, but the “adult development.” That is, there is a lot to learn (often, difficult lessons) to be good adult coordinator of a youth-driven process. There is a style sometimes called “facilitative leadership” in which the leader’s role is to support the development of the leadership of the group members. This involves a simultaneous surrender of (absolute) authority and the acceptance of the significant responsibility of supporting and coaching the authority of others.

Within the context of youth-driven research and evaluation, this often involves the coordinator providing a menu of options for the youth team to chose from (or to customize, or innovate a new solution), helping the team understand the implications of its decision paths (e.g., the relative benefits of focus groups instead versus surveys, or the balance of representativeness and feasibility in determining a sample size). If necessary, it may involve helping the team to rework its plan if decisions lead them in a direction they later realize is better to avoid. These capacities in turn demand skills such as active listening, insight into the developmental strengths and challenges of the individual team members, and cultural competence and community knowledge to create a learning space in which each team member feels safe and reflected. In addition to these leadership skills, an adult facilitator needs to have (or learn) the fundamentals of research and evaluation, and the ability to “translate” these concepts and methods into a form accessible and engaging for youth. The breadth and depth of the skills needed to facilitate a youth-driven research and evaluation process speaks to the need for organizational commitments and resources to support the recruitment and on-going professional development of such staff. This is admittedly not an easy task in the resource-scarce non-profit arena, and raises the associated issue of the role of funders in supporting this field (to be explored further below).

Youth adult partnerships also describe the relationships between youth-driven and adult-driven components of a broader research or evaluation project. Often, especially in larger projects, there will be an organization-wide, system-wide, or community-wide process driven by adults that will running at the same time as the youth-led process. In many cases, these are completely separate processes, in others, there is some effort at creating a parallel design, and in a few there is actual integration of the two processes. The latter is rare both because youth-led research and evaluation is still rare, and because such integration makes both components of the project more difficult. Harmonizing two research schedules, research designs, and organizational cultures, coupled with the added factor of age difference is no mean feat. However, if done skillfully, such a partnership can also yield powerful developmental and analytical benefits. In such cases, both research designs (e.g., the questions, tools, sampling design) gain from a cross-pollination, and opportunities for cross-generational learning and mentoring are developed. Adult researchers can obtain valuable insights into “youth culture” through interaction with their youth colleagues, and youth gain valuable networks in academic, professional and community circles.

These youth-adult partnerships do not happen in a vacuum, and therefore the issue of organizational capacity support, sustain, and benefit from youth involvement in research and evaluation is critical to consider in the development of the field. The factors that affect the readiness of an organization to engage in these activities can be understood to involve:

- organizational structures (e.g., ways decisions are made, information is communicated, types of staff positions);
- organizational cultures (the shared values, beliefs, and norms of behavior);
- organizational resources (e.g., space, program funds, professional development opportunities); and
- the relationship of the organization to the community as manifest in the local knowledge and cultural competency of the staff, as well as the openness of the organization to community involvement.

Across all of these factors, organizational capacity to engage and succeed in youth-driven research and evaluation is dependent on willingness and ability to support youth voice and agency in the organization and in the broader community. Expanding on the work of technical assistance intermediaries such the Community Network for Youth Development (www.cnyd.org) in helping align youth-serving organizations with youth development principles, the field should consider methods of assessing and helping organizations align themselves with principles of youth involvement in research and evaluation (Yu 2002).

Community Development

Just as youth involvement does not occur in an organizational vacuum, neither does organizational development occur within a social vacuum. Community context is an important dimension to consider in the development of the field. This section will address the articulation of the knowledge generated by youth with community action, and queries the relationship between youth-driven research and evaluation and other social forms such as civic engagement, community organizing, and policy formation.

As a branch of action research, youth-driven research and evaluation assumes a link between the generation and the application of knowledge to social change. This perspective on youth-driven research and evaluation makes the important but relatively unexplored connection between youth development and community development. In the absence of such a connection, youth development occurs in a kind of never-never land stripped of a political, economic, cultural, or historical context. When isolated from community development, youth development suffers in its ability to cultivate young people's individual growth and their membership in communities. Youth are "developed" through set activities rather than participation in real world experiences and projects. At best, this passive model deprives youth of valuable learning opportunities and relationships; at worst, it leads to young peoples' alienation and resentment of the implied low expectations. It fails to acknowledge that community development activities – researching issues and needs, planning initiatives, organizing projects, securing resources, facilitating groups, and evaluating success – are ideal development opportunities for youth (and all community members). Consequently, young people are denied their right to learn how to be stewards of their community.

Separated from youth involvement, community development initiatives also suffer. In the absence of youth leadership, programs, organizations, and communities fail to reflect young people's needs and aspirations and development processes lose young people's energy and knowledge. Not only does this model fail young people, it fragments the whole community and saps the vitality required for successful development. By not integrating youth at all levels, development processes can actually jeopardize the future of the community itself.

In contrast, when thought of and practiced together, youth and community development can serve mutually supportive processes. Connecting youth and community development can produce generative and self-sustaining processes that serve to revitalize communities and the organizations and individuals within them. In partnership, these modes of development can create ladders of responsibility that draw youth into progressively higher levels of organizational and community leadership. This ladder of leadership raises the question of how high, and to where are the youth climbing? A range of destinations is possible each with their own application of youth voice. Natural extensions of youth involvement in research and evaluation include the revitalization of communities through civic engagement – the participation in and contribution towards existing social institutions (Delli Carpini, 2000), youth engagement in policy formation (such as the Pilots to Policy process in California), and youth organizing, including both the phenomenon of youth joining adult organizing efforts and leading their own campaigns (James and McGillicuddy 2001). While there is some tension between the advocates for each of these modes of social action, I would argue any

one of these options provides a potential way of linking the knowledge generation process to meaningful social change.

Towards a Field

Thus far, this article has considered youth involvement in research and evaluation within the existing contexts of youth, organizational, and community development. To conclude this discussion, it may be useful to step outside these contexts, and view the field as a context in its own right. This section will examine two field-defining issues: the question of institutions, and the question of resources.

The institutional question asks what institutional forms will best support the development of the field? To date the form has been primarily a social network with a few regional nodes (most notably perhaps, this gathering). It may be that this is an appropriate form to continue, but some alternative may be more effective. Such alternatives might include an association, a journal, a regular conference, one or more joint projects between participants in the growing network. Is there a need for a new hub organization (or range of organizations) to champion and support the growth of the field? If so, what kind of organizations would be most appropriate?: a university center, community-based organization, an intermediary? While the network has grown fairly organically as members have been attracted to participate by shared interests, it may be useful to assess the composition of the network as it exists: are there types of members that are not adequately represented, or some that are over-represented? How appropriate is the mix of adults to youth? Should the field work to expand internationally? And of course, we need to query the utility of defining and forming a new field per se, instead of integrating the values of youth involvement into existing fields with their existing institutions. If this is the case, which existing fields are the appropriate ones to infiltrate: youth development, community development, community organizing, evaluation, action research?

Finally, there is the bottom line, the question of money. Youth involvement in research and evaluation does not come cheap. In its fullest expression it involves funds for youth stipends/ compensation, staff compensation, program materials, final product production and dissemination. Often a youth involvement component is an add-on (if it is funded at all) to the “regular” research or evaluation process. Given that most evaluations are under-funded (relative to the expectations of funders and grantees alike), the youth driven components are profoundly under-resourced. For the field – and simply the practices – of youth involvement in research and evaluation to survive and thrive, it must be seen as a substantive part of program improvement, organizational learning, and community development, and funded accordingly. This would involve not only high enough amounts of funding, but sustained levels of funding to ensure youth involvement in a continuous learning and improvement process. One challenge in this call for increased funder support of research and evaluation is to balance the interests of funders for accountability, and the interests of organizations and communities for learning. While funders certainly deserve to know how and how well their funds are being spent, the driving value of research and evaluation should not be accountability and control, but rather empowerment and liberation.

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ENDNOTES

¹ See Arnstein 1979 and Harte 1997 for depictions of ladders of citizen and youth participation.