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Advancing Positive Youth Development: Perspectives of Youth as Researchers and Evaluators

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Abstract: *This article describes the journey taken by a group of adolescents into the field and practice of youth-led research. The article gives voice to the growing number of youth participating in research and evaluation. The authors give authentic youth accounts of: (1) the process of becoming researchers and evaluators, (2) the benefits and challenges encountered as researchers and evaluators, (3) the community-based research they conducted, (4) the state and national recognition received as researchers and evaluators, (5) implications for practice and the future of youth-led research, and (6) steps necessary to move the field and study of youth-led research forward.*

Introduction

The literature base supporting youth-led research as a subject of study and field of practice is continually developing. Understanding youth-led research as a practical and transformative practice of organizational change and youth development was brought to the forefront by Sabo (2003) with the publication of *New Directions for Youth Development*, a journal issue devoted entirely to youth participatory evaluation. The seminal works of Delgado (2006) and Flores (2008) delve into the foundations of youth-led research, covering its definition, historical perspectives, theoretical underpinnings, and social benefits. Anecdotal evidence and results of research devoted to youth participatory evaluation describe improvement in social science competencies (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998), increased development of life skills (Flores, 2008), and impacts on positive youth development (White, 2009). Articles describe how youth participate in research and evaluation, the issues youth face as researchers, and the implications for practice and need for future research (Ashton, Arnold, & Wells, 2010; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Powers & Tiffany, 2006).

The guidebooks, curriculum, and activities developed by Arnold and Wells (2007); Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2005); Flores (2008); London, O'Connor, and Camino (2005); and London, Zimmerman, and Erbstein (2003) have helped adults and their youth contemporaries develop research and evaluation skills. Presentations to 4-H youth development educators by youth researchers and evaluators describing youth-led research as a pathway to positive youth development (White, Shoffner, Steensen, Knowles, Johnson, Mills, & Conklin, 2009) and a presentation of the perspectives of youth researchers and evaluators at an American Evaluation Association conferences (White, Shoffner, Knowles, Johnson, Mills, & Flores, 2009) have advanced the field and practice.

Camino (2005) noted that little research examined youth voice and how decision making, problem solving, and program planning influenced community building. Jones and Perkins (2005) found a lack of research devoted to societal views of youth voice and participation in youth programs.

While it is becoming relatively easy to find scholarly contributions from academicians, consultants, and practitioners that lend a filtered perspective to youth-led research, there exists a scarcity of peer-reviewed articles written by youth researchers and evaluators. If youth participation in research and evaluation is uneven (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003), the irregularity is even more apparent in the lack of youth voice in its documentation. The acquisition and dissemination of research and evaluation knowledge is enhanced when the responsibility of moving the field and practice of youth-led research forward is shared with youth.

To address this gap in the literature, this feature article gives voice to the growing number of youth participating in research and evaluation. The authors give authentic youth accounts of: (1) the process of becoming researchers and evaluators, (2) the benefits and challenges encountered as researchers and evaluators, (3) the community-based research the authors conducted, (4) the state and national recognition received as researchers and evaluators, (5) implications for practice and the future of youth-led research and evaluation, and (6) the steps necessary to move the field and study of youth-led research and evaluation forward.

Narratives describe this journey, taken by a group of adolescents, into the field and practice of youth-led research. Ten youth embarked on a research project. The group faced the difficulties posed by high school, college, and many other commitments. Eventually, the group included just four researchers. Nonetheless, they managed to conduct focus groups,

analyze qualitative data, write reports of results, disseminate the results, present at professional conferences, and co-write a scholarly article.

Becoming Researchers and Evaluators

Ten of us began the journey to become youth researchers. There were four males and six females. We were sophomores and juniors in high school. We participated in a 3-day training session. We were fortunate to be taught research and evaluation skills by the authors of a nationally recognized curriculum entitled *Participatory Evaluation with Youth: Building Skills for Youth Community Action* (Arnold & Wells, 2007).

During the training, our group learned about youth/adult interactions; teamwork; organizing, recording, and analyzing information; community forums; and how to facilitate forums. At the end of our training, we selected a topic to explore. We believed our topic would be compelling. We wanted to help secondary and post-secondary administrators understand why some high school seniors choose not to further their education by going to college.

Even though we gained many ideas and skills from the 3-day training session, we didn't fully develop the social science research skills we needed until we performed them in our project. Our skills and perspectives about youth-led research were shaped by the research we conducted, the numerous challenges we encountered, the recognition we received, and lessons we learned and wanted to share.

Methodology

Forums were not conducted in the strict sense of the word. While the secondary school environment could be viewed as a community, the venue was not open to the public. Instead, focus groups were conducted within two high schools in the county's two largest cities in the spring of 2009. Subjects for the focus groups were junior and senior high school students. Informants were purposefully sampled (Creswell, 1998) because of their perceived ability to reflect the voices of their peers (Arnold & Lesmeister, 2006). One focus group was conducted in a high school located in a city with a population over 82,000. Fourteen subjects consented to participate (eight females and six males). The second high school was in a smaller city with a population of more than 21,000. Four focus groups were conducted. Each focus group consisted of five informants. Fourteen females and six males consented to participate.

Each group met for a class period of nearly an hour. A recorder, not involved in the facilitation, used flip charts to record responses to predetermined questions. Video and audio recordings were not utilized. Facial expressions, body language, dress, and identity were not believed to be integral to the assessments (White, Arnold, & Lesmeister, 2008). Videotapes and audio recordings were not made. E. Espinoza, as cited in White et al. (2008), believes these methods create discomfort and distress among participants while also inhibiting dialogue. The information transcribed and coded (Creswell, 2003) produced three themes.

Validity

Focus groups are not subject to internal and external validity required of quantitative experiments (White, Arnold, & Lesmeister, 2008). White et al. (2008) believes focus groups, in this context, can be used to record a "snap shot of perspectives and perceptions" of high school upper classmates (p. 3). However, the trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility of focus groups are dependent on the categorical, associational,

conversational, and relational contexts within groups (Hollander, 2004). Hollander suggests that the youth participants in the focus groups likely knew each other and that their responses to questions were possibly shaped by the social environment within the focus groups. Therefore, careful consideration was given to focus group composition, participant relationships, settings, dialogue encouraged, and speaking opportunity (White et al., 2008). A facilitator reviewed and transcribed the notes. Through consensus, the final interpretation of the report of results was made by the focus group facilitators, recorders, and group leader.

Community-Based Research

We completed the focus groups in two high schools in the spring of 2009. At each group, we asked the following questions.

1. For high school students not planning to attend college, what are some of the reasons you decide not to go?
2. What changes do you suggest that high schools make that would encourage disinterested students to go to college?
3. What changes would you suggest that colleges make that would encourage disinterested students to go to college?
4. Where do you go now to get information regarding post-high school education options?

Three themes emerged from our study:

1. Lack of money
2. Lack of support from parents
3. Lack of information from colleges

Financing a post-secondary education was a leading issue. However, we found that one of the significant reasons that high school students decided not to attend college is a lack of parental support. While high school students praised their school's career centers, they believed there was a lack of information available concerning scholarships. Students in our focus groups also told us that high schools had many resources for students, yet they didn't mention opportunities for parents to understand the college selection process used by graduates.

These results and related recommendations were sent to the principals at the participating high schools, school district superintendents, and community college and four year institution administrators.

Benefits and Challenges of Youth-Led Research

As a youth-led research group, we faced challenges both internally and externally. The difficulties that we encountered tested, changed, and improved our processes and taught us valuable lessons to pass on to future researchers.

As youth in an adult-dominated field, we encountered adult- and age-related difficulties. The primary example came as we worked to secure a subject population for our focus groups. With the subject population of our study being high school students, both those college bound and those not going on to higher education, it was decided that the study subjects could

best be accommodated by facilitating the focus groups in a school environment—preferably after school or during a break.

We went to the high school counselors with our proposal to conduct focus groups. We requested their assistance in identifying a group of students to accurately represent the population of the school. We received very little assistance when we approached administrators. The counselors were not helpful. They were unable to identify students for our focus groups. We were told to display posters around the building, advertising our event and inviting any and all participants. This would have been a fine approach for some school events, but for focus groups it was far from desirable. We were not being taken seriously. We were simply brushed off.

At this point, in desperate need of participants, our adult leader phoned school administrators. He received instant assistance (Personal communication, David J. White, 2009). He convinced the vice principal to advertise the focus groups in classes. One principal encouraged teachers to offer extra credit for participating in the focus groups after speaking with our adult leader. This experience solidified our belief that we faced prejudice as youth taking on traditional adult roles and responsibilities.

As a group, we also faced internal constraints. Our primary struggle came from our daily realities. We have busy lives. For example, Campbell, Lamming, Lemp, Brosnahan, Paterson, and Pusey (2008) identified meeting times, transportation, and lack of engaging meetings as common barriers to structured youth involvement. We all participate in extracurricular activities in addition to our typical 4-H projects, jobs, and ever-present schoolwork. Finding a time that we could all meet was nearly impossible. We finally had to accept that everyone could not be at every meeting. It was through our difficulties with meeting and leading busy lives that we lost six of our original 10 members.

Camino (2005) described youth learning to differentiate between wants and needs and those of the community. As we moved into the project, personality traits became more evident. Part of being youth in leadership positions means that we are all leaders and want to act as such. This created clashes within the group. Similarly, there came a point in our research where we had to accept that we were all leaders, that we could fill different leadership roles within the project, and that we would never get any of our research or data analysis completed if we didn't recognize and honor individual and group assets. Through time it became apparent that we began to function better as a group, though we still disagreed with each other at times.

The final barrier we encountered was both a benefit and a challenge—the role of the adult leader in our group. He was a good mentor with good ideas. This was also a stumbling block. As a youth-led research group we needed to develop our own ideas and to learn from failure and success. When our mentor proposed ideas, we had a tendency to say "what a great idea," and we usually didn't try to come up with something better. This encouraged our group leader to attend fewer meetings so we would develop our own ideas and systems.

Recognition by Peers

We had the opportunity to share our experiences with 4-H faculty attending a statewide staff development conference (White, Shoffner, Steensen, Knowles, Johnson, Mills, & Conklin, 2009). At that point, we had six of the original 10 members remaining in our group. We presented our perspectives of youth-led research, our training experience, the process of completing human subjects training, and our current work. 4-H faculty

members present at the conference were very excited about our research. They were even more impressed with the fact that we were performing research as part of the 4-H program. We learned key presentation skills that later helped us present at the American Evaluation Association (AEA) annual conference in Orlando, Florida (White, Shoffner, Knowles, Johnson, Mills, & Flores, 2009). Four of us (one male and three females), out of the six remaining team members, presented our perspectives as researchers and evaluators and the results of our research at the AEA conference.

Implications for the Fields and Practices of Youth-Led Research and Positive Youth Development

As noted by Powers and Tiffany (2006), certain factors must be taken into consideration when working with youth. One, youth need time to learn, practice, and improve as researchers. Two, youth still need social, economic, and logistic support. Three, youth researchers need to practice responsible human subjects research. Four, organizations that promote and practice youth-led research need to take youth voice seriously. Five, youth-led research should not span an extended period of time. Six, youth must be provided multiple opportunities to participate in and provide leadership for research projects.

The roles played by youth conducting research are similar to actors in a play (Flores, 2008). Success in research and evaluation, as on stage, is the result of repeated rehearsals, multiple performances, and receptive audiences. Intentional training in youth-led research, clearly defined leadership roles, and manageable timelines should be facilitated, accepted, and established to accommodate the busy lives of youth.

Youth-led research is not an inexpensive proposition. Youth researchers need adults with the time, talent, and resources to fully invest in youth-led research. The busy lives of youth often parallel the lives of adults. Therefore, the timeframe for planning and conducting research should accommodate the lives of youth as well as adults. Equally important, time should be built into every meeting for socialization including snacks and beverages.

Youth researchers represent diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. They do not enter the field with steady employment, expendable resources, transportation, and travel or professional development budgets. Youth-led research will always require the economic and logistical support of parents, organizations, institutions, agencies, and benefactors.

The concept of youth-led research may be new to institutional review boards. The boards may not fully understand the credible role youth can play in research or how they fit into the research conducted by a university. Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) or National Institutes of Health (NIH) training in human subjects should be an expectation for youth researchers. Training does provide a level of credibility.

Youth require measured assistance and guidance from an adult leader to get through tough and trying times. Youth need help overcoming the adultism or ageism that hinders their implementation of research and questions their credibility as researchers. The ability of youth to competently and confidently finish a project, compile results, and distribute findings lends credibility to the field and practice of youth-led research. The administrators of agencies and institutions being studied need to appreciate the credentials and experience of youth researchers, acknowledge the need for the research, understand the research methodology, value the results, and communicate what practical use will

be made of the results. Of the six reports distributed to secondary and post-secondary administrators, only one administrator acknowledged that the results were being shared with enrollment services and marketing staff. It was equally gratifying to read that the findings within the report aligned with results of surveys and observations conducted by the institution.

Youth-led research isn't necessarily about the practical utilization of the research findings. Youth-led research is increasingly seen as a tremendous opportunity to positively impact the lives of youth (Wheeler, 2005). Powers and Tiffany (2006) identified seven developmental assets acquired through youth-led research: (1) leadership skills; (2) critical thinking; (3) social networking; (4) writing, analyzing, and presenting; (5) decision making, (6) intergenerational and community relationships; and (7) serving as role models. According to Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003), youth participation in evaluative processes increases adolescent understanding of socially just and democratic processes by providing them with opportunities to develop knowledge, exercise political rights, gain access to information, practice civic engagement, and create community change.

While we believed the work we conducted was practical and important, it was the transformative aspect of our research that was most significant. What really had an impact on us was presenting to other evaluators, learning to lead, becoming team players, and learning to be organized and efficient. One of the greatest things that we struggled with through this process was deciding how involved our adult leader needed to be. Without him, our meetings were slow, it was difficult to stay on task, and we had trouble meeting deadlines. Likewise, our leader had to learn to balance letting us lead ourselves while keeping us on task. We learned it was necessary for an adult to keep us on task and hold us to deadlines; this wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Perhaps the greatest implication for a youth-driven research agenda is the effect it has on the production and ownership of knowledge (Delgado, 2006). Delgado suggests that the solutions to issues facing youth must be authenticated by quantitative and qualitative research methodologies that place youth in positions of power to influence and determine how new knowledge is used. Acceptance of this new cadre of researcher and evaluator will link information across generations.

Next Steps

The field and practice of youth-led research is in need of systematic studies that validate practical application of findings, negative developmental impacts, and positive youth development benefits (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Noticeably absent in the literature are accounts and perspectives of youth-led research that are not filtered through an adult lens. While studies should be conducted by adults, there is room for contributions made by youth and adult teams.

Youth trained and invested in research and evaluation recognize the need to perform to gain important social science research skills. The research youth conduct must have meaning to them and practical use for their youth and adult contemporaries.

White (2009) made these observations of adult roles in youth-led research projects. First, the ability for youth to navigate within the field and practice of youth-led research require intergenerational commitment and perseverance. Second, youth engaged in youth-led research fall short of achieving their goals without mentor/adult investment of time, talent, and resources. While adult guidance and assistance must be measured, it is still

necessary in the eyes of youth researchers. Third, while youth researchers and evaluators operate in concert with adults, adultism and ageism remain significant barriers to the practical and transformative benefits of youth-led research.

Organizations, agencies, and institutions that receive benefits from youth-led research should acknowledge and validate the worth of results and communicate what, if any, practical use will be made of the results.

Finally, adult researchers gain recognition of scholarly achievement through journals, books, and conferences. Without adult support, these venues are economically and logistically out of reach or uninviting to youth researchers. If youth are to demonstrate competence and confidence as researchers, more will need to be done to connect them with their adult counterparts. Scholarships that support conference registrations, travel, and lodging will be required. The use of electronic media (e.g., Polycom, Adobe Connect, or GoToMeeting) can connect youth researchers from remote locations.

Failure to accommodate the needs of young researchers marginalizes their contributions and hinders the development of youth-led research as a field, practice, and subject of study.

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