

Prepare for the Most Significant Challenges of Y-AP/E

almost all evaluations in the United States are conducted by adults only. In essence, adults are collecting data and making judgments about the policies and programs that influence the lives of young people, but the youth have no involvement in the process at all. As we read the literature, there are few analyses or practical discussions about how youth and adults can conduct evaluations as partners. That being said, there does appear to be an emerging expectation that youth should be key actors in evaluation research.

As we reviewed the literature, it became clear that there were some common challenges experienced by all Y-AP/E projects. Some projects were successful in meeting these challenges. Others were not. *The main factor that differentiated the successful from the less successful projects was the extent to which stakeholders were aware of the challenges and took them seriously.* The less successful initiatives seemed to underestimate the significance of the challenges, failed to deal with them directly, and/or hoped that the challenges would somehow resolve themselves and go away.

We discovered a fundamental finding of success: being keenly aware of the special challenges which arise when youth and adults work together, and addressing them throughout the duration of the project. These challenges stem from the inexperience of many adults (Leverage Point #1), the complexities of working with youth (Leverage Point #2) and issues related to existing structures and norms within organizations (Leverage Point #3).

But as noted above, it is critical that project coordinators be aware of these challenges before initiating a Y-AP/E project. Pondering and preparing for these challenges in your way and with your colleagues, in consideration of your own circumstances, is the best strategy for high quality Y-AP/E.

LEVERAGE POINT #1:
**Acknowledge
the Inexperience
and Concerns of
Many Adults**

Very few adults are accustomed to sharing power with youth, especially around issues of evaluation. This is not a put-down of adults, but rather recognition that youth-adult partnership is not a normative practice in the United States. This context represents a significant challenge, given that the purpose of Y-AP/E is to create organizational spaces and opportunities where youth can participate meaningfully (i.e., not as tokens) in decisions that affect them.

Faced with difficult and new challenges, adults (or youth) often become scared or intimidated. When adults are inexperienced in a certain task, they will often fall back on familiar patterns of behavior. They might perceive youths' desire for involvement as a challenge to their authority. Research also shows that sometimes adults will reverse their behavior - and relinquish all control and accountability to youth. This clearly is not partnership. Be aware of these dynamics and be prepared to deal with them. Adults are not trying to be malicious. They are simply showing their inexperience in partnering with young people on things that matter.

Research also indicates that many adults are skeptical of youths' ability or interest to engage in collaborative evaluations. Again, this is not to discount adults. Since few adults have observed youth participating in research, they do not know what youth are capable of achieving. They have not seen, first hand, that youth can, and will, be valuable contributors to the process. The lesson from research: start with the assumption that adults want to be partners with youth, and act accordingly. Early on, provide opportunities for youth and adults to get to know each other, and most importantly, create situations where adults can directly observe the competence and commitment of young people.

LEVERAGE POINT #2:
**Adapt to the
Complexities of
Youths' Lives**

A significant challenge to Y-AP/E is that many youth are extremely busy. What looks like a lack of interest or follow through is often a symptom of something else: a lack of transportation, the need to care for siblings, conflicts with work, or competing schedules with school, extracurricular, or service commitments. Youth constantly have to prioritize their activities since they have multiple commitments and distractions.

Given this situation, it is often difficult to maintain the interest of youth over time. At some points, the evaluation process might feel like a never ending homework assignment. Almost all youth like collecting data, but many young people (like adults) will lose patience if the data analysis is prolonged. They want to draw conclusions and make recommendations. Youth want to be doing something that makes a difference right now!

It is also true that almost all youth are inexperienced in conducting evaluations, interacting with adults as partners, or collaborating with peers as part of a team. Young people bring varying developmental capacities, skill levels and learning styles to Y-AP/E projects. Keeping everyone engaged and productive can be a perplexing task for project coordinators. Recognizing and being comfortable with this as "normal" is necessary. Planning for periods of youth disinterest and for how to divide tasks when not everyone has the same ability or motivation are critical challenges for coordinators, but ones that can be overcome.

LEVERAGE POINT #3: **Respond to Existing Structures and Norms within Organizations**

Participatory evaluation is naturally unpredictable, and this also holds true for Y-AP/E. The research literature is full of case examples of the many ways that organizations may not offer a hospitable climate for Y-AP/E to flourish. Project coordinators will need to respond to the existing structures and norms and either attempt to change or modify these conditions, or adapt to them.

When the organization is based on strict adherence to hierarchy, tradition, and established structures, there will likely be tension when the evaluation research begins. Schools are the obvious example, but similar challenges can be significant in youth programs, community organizations, or local coalitions. It is important that project coordinators be prepared for possible push back from organizations as the YAP/E project proceeds. As youth become more involved in the project, they are likely to question current rules or procedures. This simple search for explanation or discussion by youth could be perceived as questioning authority or threatening to the status quo of the organization or institution. This is especially true when youth seek to discuss their concerns around issues of race, ethnicity, and social justice.

Almost all settings have formal and informal power hierarchies where certain adults wield more influence in the environment. These individuals use their power to facilitate or block change. The challenge is to figure out how to engage their support of Y-AP/E, or at a minimum, be neutral at the initiation of the project. It is especially important to do the preparatory work and relationship building to create a hospitable environment for young people. Enabling youth to make decisions in traditional (and, often, untraditional) environments can be beneficial to the project, especially when power-wielding adults are included in early agreements and participate in setting project direction.

Y-AP/E has to start in a physical setting. Young people need a space of their own for Y-AP/E, even in today's techno-savvy world. The room should be large enough for the group to sit comfortably, or move around for activities. Ideally, it should be a private space, not in a location where other groups meet simultaneously. Finding a space to meet and store project materials is always a challenge. Being prepared with a good space for Y-AP/E is likely to ensure early success of the project.

KEY LITERATURE FOR TIP SHEET 2:

- Brown, Kelli R. McCormack; McDermott, Robert J.; Bryant, Carol A.; Forthofer, Melinda S.
Youth as Community Researchers. *Community Youth Development Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2003, (Especially addresses leverage point 1.)
- Camino, Linda
Pitfalls and Promising Practices of Youth-Adult Partnerships: An Evaluator's Reflections. *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2005, (Especially addresses leverage point 1.)
- Ozer, Emily J; Ritterman, Miranda; Wanis, Maggie G
Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Middle School: Opportunities, Constraints, and Key Processes. *American Journal of Community Psychology* (2010) 46: 152-166. (Especially addresses leverage point 3.)
- Zimmerman, Kristen; and London, Jonathan
Getting to Go: Building Organizational Capacity to Engage in Youth-led Research, Evaluation, and Planning. *Community Youth Development Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2003, (Addresses leverage points 1-3)