Maximize the Relevance and Utilization of Evaluation

Y-AP/E has a clear bottom line:

to make stakeholders aware of a particular problem and/or to bring information to those who can use it to strengthen policies and programs. It is that simple. As we reviewed the literature, we found that *the most successful project managers were those who used this bottom line as a touchstone from the very beginning of a Y-AP/E project to its completion.*

The striving for relevance and utilization of the evaluation drove all decision making. Toward that end, managers focused on choosing the correct research questions (Leverage Point #1), maximizing the diversity of youth researchers and community voices (Leverage Point #2), carefully selecting research methods (Leverage Point #3), and preparing and strategically sharing results and recommendations (Leverage Point #4).

LEVERAGE POINT #1:
Choose the Correct Research Questions

This might sound obvious, but it is more difficult than it appears. Taking the time to choose the "best" questions for the evaluation is time well spent. Good questions ground all efforts of the Y-AP/E team. They focus the initiative, and ensure that the information gathered is relevant to the stakeholders who will ultimately use it. It is important, therefore, not to rush through this task.

Issue Identification

It is essential that the youth feel that the issue to be evaluated – be it school reform, racism, or the beautification of a local park – is important to their day to day lives. This can be frustrating for adults who have a worthy agenda, but have not taken the time to see whether youth share their concerns. Youth voices count as much as adult voices when it comes to issue identification. For it is only when youth are committed to the issue that the Y-AP/E project will flourish.

When young people fully understand the realities of the issue they are studying, they are better prepared for successful participation in a Y-AP/E project. A primary role for adults is to help youth gain their own understanding of this larger context. This might include, for example, discussion about existing power structures and the cycle of social/institutional change. Young people must understand that change is always controversial, that there are often winners and losers, and unexpected consequences.

One of the most effective strategies is to have the Y-AP/E team conduct observations and interviews with key stakeholders prior to establishing the evaluation questions. When youth get to hear about the importance of the issue from different vantage points, their commitment to the project quickly accelerates.

Research Questions

The process of generating research questions begins after the larger issue has been identified. At that point, youth and adults participate in brainstorming activities to generate a list of possible research questions. Slowly, the team builds consensus around specific questions. These questions are emphasized and highlighted every time the Y-AP/E group gets together. The questions ground the process. The questions will change somewhat over time, of course, but it is best not to radically change them after the data collection begins.

THE ADULT ROLE IS DIRECT: Keep it manageable! Evaluations can focus on only three or four questions at a time. There will always be pressure to make the study "really big." Actually, the evaluation will be far more relevant and its findings are more likely to be used if it has a clearly defined focus.

LEVERAGE POINT #2:
Maximize the Diversity of Youth Researchers and Community Voices

Evaluations are most relevant and utilized when a diverse array of stakeholders participate in the process. Successful project managers, therefore, insist on effective outreach. Outreach focuses on the recruitment of youth to the Y-AP/E team. It also focuses on involving and interviewing a range of organizational and community stakeholders during the evaluation. Such strategies will ensure that the evaluation findings will fully respect the diverse voices of people who are impacted by the findings.

Selecting and Retaining Youth

Before recruiting young people for the Y-AP/E project, it is important to identify who you wish to have on the team. Research indicates that personal interest is the most important criteria when selecting youth for the Y-AP/E project. Youth have to be excited about the goals or intrigued by purposes of the project. Diversity is the next criteria. Having a diverse team brings a wealth of perspective and experience to the issue under study. It is especially useful to select youth of differing ages. This diversity allows for peer mentoring. It ensures that "experienced" youth are still available when other youth graduate or stop participating.

Other criteria identified by research include: (1) the willingness to work in teams, the ability to listen and show respect to others, and a commitment to confidentiality; (2) the particular knowledge or skill set that is needed for the project, be it prior experience in doing research, conducting interviews, or using a camera; and (3) contacts, networks, or an insider perspective to the community or issue under study.

When recruitment is done well, issues of retention are also addressed at the same time. Youth who have an interest in the project and have competencies consistent with project needs are most likely to be a good match over the longer term. These are the youth who will sustain their participation. Other core strategies for retaining youth include:

Have good functional technology: Some projects find that having the "right" equipment is crucial. When the technology doesn't work youth will be frustrated or lose interest.

Work with youths' schedules: Facilitators always have to be cognizant that youth have other academic, extracurricular, and employment obligations. Attempts should be made to help youth work around their busy schedules. Youth will not attend all meetings. There need to be ways to keep youth up to speed and to communicate assignments.

Use active learning: Youth want to be doing things. If project meetings are not interspersed, for example, with opportunities to role play, discuss controversial events, or have a snack, youth will lose enthusiasm and momentum.

Reflect on the process and results: Throughout the project, youth must have multiple opportunities to obtain feedback on their research process and their data. Ongoing reflection with key stakeholders outside of the project reinforces the fact that the project is connected to something larger than themselves and is important to a larger community. Although time-consuming, these experiences are highly valued by young people.

Compensation: If possible, provide payment for those youth who participate fully.

Hearing from Diverse Community Stakeholders

It is most critical that the Y-AP/E team hear from the community or organizational members – both adults and youth – who are most directly influenced by the issue under study. There are three core outreach strategies:

Maximizing community voices happens first during data collection. The aim is to interview and/or survey those persons who have the most to gain or lose from your research. It is important to gain perspective, knowledge, and insight from these individuals. This strategy will ensure that the Y-AP/E team garners perspective from those who have the knowledge and a stake in the outcome of the evaluation.

After the analysis is concluded, some evaluators will conduct "informant checks." In other words, they will send the findings of the research to representatives of those groups most affected by the evaluation and ask for comment. These "checks" can also be done in person.

In the same fashion, Y-AP/E teams often ask for comments during public presentations of the study. When planning these presentations, the Y-AP/E teams strive to reach out and invite all segments of the community so that members will have the chance to provide their feedback and perspective.

THE BOTTOM LINE: It is important to stress that nobody – youth or adult – will be able to participate in all aspects of the Y-AP/E project. One should plan for this reality by having multiple persons take on key aspects of the project, thus sharing responsibility. Further, it is important that participants choose and commit to certain responsibilities. When youth and adults are able to participate in ways consistent with their interests and availability, they are most likely to make substantial contributions to the project.

LEVERAGE POINT #3:
Careful Selection of Methods

Too many Y-AP/E initiatives become overwhelmed by vast amounts of data and by an inability to analyze them. Successful project managers know how to find a balance. They strive to collect only data of the highest "priority." They use methods – be it interview, survey, photovoice – that fit with stakeholders' experience. Similarly, successful project managers choose data analysis strategies that are valid for the purposes of the evaluation, but at the same time, they are mindful that participants will lose interest if the analysis takes too long.

Data Collection.

The purpose of data collection is to gather information that will help "answer" the research questions. In choosing methods, it is useful to consider the following: (1) It is important to use research methods that can be learned by persons (youth and adults) who have not previously conducted research. There is no need to be overly complicated. (2) Some methods appeal to and energize youth, and these should be used when possible. Giving youth (and adults) some options in terms of methods will facilitate excitement about participation. (3) Research information is time sensitive. It is best to choose methods that can be collected and analyzed rather quickly.

Y-AP/E teams typically use one or more of the following methods. Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, so it is important to consider which method will best fit the research questions and time availability of the Y-AP/E team.

Review of Existing Documents and Studies

Most issues have been studied previously. Y-AP/E teams can benefit from the insight of others. Discussing existing information allows the team to create a shared foundation. It allows the team to "not recreate the wheel" by collecting data that some other group has already collected. Such reviews allow Y-AP/E team members to learn about and get excited about the issue.

Observations

Going into the field and making observations is also energizing to youth. When youth go into the field – be it a community or organizational setting – to observe the phenomenon or issues under study, they gain an experiential and emotional knowledge that cannot be achieved elsewhere. Youth can document their observations through photography or field notes.

Personal Interviews

Interviews provide a means for understanding an issue in great depth. Interviews allow the community stakeholders to speak in their own voices without the filter of a survey or even an observation. It allows the stakeholders to discuss what they would like to see in the future. It is extremely important to accurately record information gathered during the interview to ensure that the individual's views are not misrepresented. Either use a tape recorder, or have a note taker to assist with this process

The Community Survey

Surveys are useful for understanding the "big picture" of how different stakeholder groups understand a given issue. Community surveys allow the youth-adult research team to assess the extent to which the stakeholders endorse different options and proposals. The trick is to keep the survey short and focused on priority issues. It is also useful to "pilot test" the survey to make sure that people understand the questions in the way that you intend.

Data collection is an ideal time for youth to take on significant responsibilities. A primary role for adults is to help prepare youth. Before conducting interviews, for example, it is important for youth to engage in role playing in order to practice their skills. Early on, it is useful for adults to be co-interviewers, and to provide young people with constructive feedback. Similarly, it is ideal for adults and youth to conduct observations collaboratively. In that way they can reflect on what they observed, learn how to document observations, and finally, relate the observations to the research questions.

There are numerous data analysis strategies found in the literature which are listed in the section titled "Practical and Engaging Data Analysis Strategies." Review the list to see what works best with your Y-AP/E project: categorizing, charting, or building a collage map or a diagram. Perhaps your data are best-suited to a data dialogue posting, or creating poetry or a story board by individuals or the group. Maybe after reviewing the list of data analysis strategies you will choose to collect data using a process called photovoice and create a display for the wider community to reflect upon.

LEVERAGE POINT #4:
Strategically Share Results and Recommendations

Information alone is not sufficient to produce a shift in power relations, program or policy. It is organized information in the hands of organized people that creates change. It is for this reason that the most effective Y-AP/E groups start thinking about dissemination well before the study is completed.

In many cases, the Y-AP/E team is presenting to stakeholders within their own organization (such as their school or community center). The aim is to present to the top leaders (such as the executive director, board of directors, or principal). Y-AP/E teams have found it useful to create the expectation, and set a deadline, for the leaders to respond to the organization. And at the same time it is necessary to reach out to other stakeholders. Y-AP/E teams engage staff, teachers, and young people in regularly scheduled listening and learning sessions. In this way, both top down and bottom up strategies are used.

In many other cases, the Y-AP team has studied broader issues that cross-cut many parts of the larger community. To disseminate study recommendations, the Y-AP/E team typically organizes community forums and presentations to community coalitions to reach core stakeholder groups and those with the institutional power. During the forums, the Y-AP/E team creates the expectation that the recommendations be addressed. Plans can be met for follow-up meetings, with the aim being to enhance accountability among community leaders.

One or two forums, even with strong follow up, are not always sufficient to spark change. It is for this reason that the most effective Y-AP/E teams reach out to allies during the dissemination phase of the project. Allies can be other youth groups, organizations, or associations that are willing to publicize and advocate for the study findings and recommendations. As the coalition grows around the study findings, the potential for utilization grows accordingly.

Crafting Recommendations

As the study draws to a close, the Y-AP/E team must take on the critical step of preparing recommendations. Specifically, the Y-AP/E team must decide what information they are going to present to the community, and specifically to whom in the community. Asking and answering three sets of questions will prepare the Y-AP/E team for this important task.

1. What are the "most positive" study findings? What are the "most negative" or "controversial" findings from the study?
2. Which of these findings can be used to solve issues, as opposed to laying blame? How can the findings be framed so that they have the greatest likelihood of sparking action?
3. Who does the Y-AP/E team think should hear about the study findings? What are the best strategies for reaching and communicating to these people?

Once the Y-AP/E team has decided which findings and conclusions to present to the public, they can begin to craft recommendations. This can be a difficult, yet highly engaging process. Structured activities – those that are both fun and content-oriented – are ideal for helping youth and adults create study recommendations.

One practical strategy for preparing recommendations is to break the Y-AP/E team into small groups, and then to ask each group to complete sentences such as the following: (1) Our findings and conclusions indicate that the [community

organization, local leaders, school board] should... "or (2) When considering future policy and program improvements, the [community organization, local leaders, school board] should..."

As the different groups report out, perhaps by writing their answers on newsprint that's posted on a wall, the participants discover patterns and commonalities. These themes become the focus for determining the final recommendations of the group.

Youth as Presenters

Youth can be highly influential presenters and advocates for the Y-AP/E findings and recommendations. It is critical to remember, however, that most youth – even the most verbal – are inexperienced at presenting research findings to the public. Adults have to take the lead in preparing young people for this important responsibility.

Role playing is a proven way of improving public speaking skills.

Inexperienced public speakers may also benefit from having a more experienced adult partner help answer questions from the audience, keep the discussion on track, and keep an eye on the clock.

Presenting results as a team also provides a good structure, allowing multiple persons to present different aspects of the work. When youth-adult partnerships are modeled effectively, additional champions for the issue are likely to volunteer their expertise and influence to the cause.

KEY LITERATURE FOR TIP SHEET 5:

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■ (Especially addresses leverage point 1.) Girls Study Girls Inc.: Engaging Girls in Evaluation Through Participatory Action Research. American Journal of Community Psychology (2010) 46:228-237

■ Kohfeldt, Danielle; Chun, Lina; Grace; Sara; Langhout; Regina Day (Especially addresses leverage point 2.) Youth Empowerment in Context: Exploring Tensions in School-Based yPAR American Journal of Community Psychology (2011) 47:28-45

■ London, Jonathan K.; Zimmerman, Kristen; Erbstein, Nancy (Especially addresses preparing and presenting results and recommendations). Youth-Led Research and Evaluation: Tools for Youth, Organizational, and Community Development. New Directions for Evaluation, no. 98, Summer

■ Mead, June P. Map It! And Turn Up the Volume of Youth Voices. Community Youth Development Journal, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2003

■ Wang, Caroline C. Youth Participation in Photovoice as a Strategy for Community Change. Youth Participation and Community Change, 2006, 147-161

■ Zeldin, Shep; O'Connor, Cailin; Camino, Linda, Youth as Evaluators: What's an adult to do? ACT for Youth Update Center of Excellence: prACTice Matters, newsletter, January 2006