

Introduction to the Resource Guide

A Brief History of Participatory Evaluation

Participation is viewed generally as a positive activity, certainly in the context of democratic societies. Although still contested in some quarters, the idea of stakeholder participation in evaluation is widely accepted within the evaluation community. Among the many purposes of participatory evaluation two are of most interest to this Resource Guide. First, participatory evaluation has a pragmatic aim, and serves primarily as a method for strengthening groups, projects, and organizations. Second, participatory evaluation aims to be emancipatory or transformative. Its goal is to empower vulnerable populations, both by including them as evaluation partners and by focusing on issues of importance to them.

It is puzzling that participation has been reserved for adults, for the most part. Until more recently youth have been excluded from participation in evaluation. It is only over the past decade that youth have begun to be viewed as contributors to knowledge development and as key stakeholders in the study of issues and conditions that impact their lives. In other words, youth are now seen as potential contributors to the evaluation process and to the dissemination and use of evaluation findings. This expanded conceptualization of “participation” has led directly to a new field of inquiry known as “youth participatory evaluation.”

As the field has grown, different models have emerged. In some cases, youth participatory evaluation aims to make the process as youth-driven as possible. Youth, for example, identify the issues to be researched, organize, and then implement the resulting study. Adults serve as advisors only when needed. On the other end of the spectrum, youth participatory evaluation places youth in a more subordinate role. Adult-driven models see youth as advisors who participate in ways largely determined by the adult researchers.

These are not the only models. Indeed, there is a growing body of research demonstrating the positive impacts of youth-adult partnership. That is, when youth and adults work together over time, on things that matter (e.g., organizational governance, community organizing, collaborative action, projects, decision making) good things are likely to happen. Positive youth development and empowerment are promoted, adult staffs feel more confident and competent, organizations become more responsive and effective, and ultimately, communities are strengthened.

It is but a logical extension to hypothesize those similar positive impacts will occur when youth and adults work together as partners in evaluation. Indeed, while there is limited research on the issue, it does appear as though powerful things can happen when youth and adults identify a pressing problem, and then work

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collaboratively to analyze the issue, reach conclusions, and then act to publicize and garner support for their recommendations. A quick perusal of the literature, as documented subsequently in the annotated literature review, shows that regardless of the method – be it community survey, focus group, observation, or photo-voice – that Youth Adult Partnership in Evaluation (Y-AP/E) has the potential to have significant impacts on development, projects, policies, and procedures.

Purpose and Scope of this Resource Guide

The potential of Y-AP/E is not being reached as much as it could, or in our opinion, as much as it should. We have developed this Resource Guide to encourage more organizations to implement Y-AP/E, and to do so with greater efficiency and quality. Toward that end, we offer a series of “tip sheets” that identify the leverage points and best practices that are most critical to the success of Y-AP/E projects.

This Resource Guide is not a curriculum on how to do evaluation research. We do not provide guidelines on how to write a survey, for example, or discuss how to conduct interviews or community observations. Thorough and practical curricula have already been written. In the first section of this Resource Guide, we provide an overview of some of them, as well as citations for

accessible and practical texts (see Tip Sheet #1). Evaluation can be learned through self-study of previous reports and articles, as well as through learning by doing. We note, additionally, that other support is often available. Increasingly, as part of their educational training, staff gain research skills. They can potentially share this knowledge with others. Often, there are university-based researchers or extension specialists who are able to help organizations design and carry out evaluation research projects.

A “how to” understanding of evaluation is only half the equation. And, it is not always the most important half of Y-AP/E. This is because the process of conducting evaluation and the ways that youth and adults work together are often more critical, ultimately, than the technical expertise of the evaluators. Indeed, there are some evaluators who posit evaluation is more of a process of engagement than a fixed set of technical methods.

Evaluation is a multi-phased endeavor, with many embedded steps and activities. *Not everything is of equal importance, however, when it comes to implementing effective Y-AP/E.* Project managers constantly need to choose what they will pay close attention to and what is not absolutely necessary. Scholars of organizational change focus attention to “leverage points” or those key processes and moments in implementation that really make a difference in the overall success or failure of an initiative. Leverage points are those influences within an organiza-

tion where close attention can effect a substantial change in the organization itself. Often leverage follows the principle of economy of means: where the best results come not from large-scale efforts but from small well-focused actions.

This Resource Guide seeks to identify the most critical “leverage points” which have emerged from the research literature on youth participatory research and Y-AP in evaluation. Our assumption is that those project managers who can focus their time and expertise on the most critical leverage points will be best positioned for success. They and their organizations will benefit from the positive “ripple effects” that come with choosing the proper leverage points. Over the past decade, researchers have been working with practitioners and with youth to identify the most powerful leverage points for success. In this Resource Guide, we summarize what research has discovered. Our analysis is based on a synthesis of over 40 books and articles on the subject. (See the Annotated Literature Review: Essential Articles and Reports for Researchers and the Recommended Reading for Field Practitioners).

To present the findings from research, we have prepared five tip sheets and a list of data analysis strategies. Each tip sheet identifies a fundamental element of success, and leverage points for achieving success.