

Kari Robideau:

Hello there. This is Kari Robideau extension educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. I'd like to thank you for listening in on this podcast while we discuss youth voice in evaluation and really how utilizing this approach will improve your program. Sharing her insights on this as Betsy Olsen, she's an extension educator and colleague of mine at the Center for Youth Development. Betsy, thank you for joining me today.

Betsy Olsen:

Well thank you so much for having me, Kari. It's really fun.

Kari Robideau:

Yeah, and you know this is the second time that you have been on this podcast series. You joined me for episode eight where you shared five ways to measure youth adult connections. So I thank you for being on with me again.

Betsy Olsen:

Well thank you and it's very brave of you to invite me back. And I'm seeing a lot of overlap from what we talked about last time. We talked a lot about really practical ways to measure those youth adult connections and about measuring ways that adults encourage young people to voice what they think and valuing youth for their perspectives by giving them more choices. And so that's a lot of what this last blog post was about too, is being a little bit more specific about how to do that through evaluation practices.

Kari Robideau:

Well, I don't know who's braver you are, I, but I do appreciate you being on this podcast because your interest and experience with and expertise in thinking about evaluation and youth programs, many of us are into the implementation and right there with the youth, and then this evaluation aspect becomes secondary sometimes just because. Not because we mean it to, but if we're not intentional about evaluation, it's easy to let that go on the wayside. So for those who didn't listen to episode eight, which we were just referring to, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and maybe specifically your interest in evaluating youth programs?

Betsy Olsen:

Well sure. So I've been with the Center for Youth Development at the University of Minnesota for about five years, which I can't believe, but is true. And before that I worked for the University of Wisconsin extension service in Grant County in very south western Wisconsin.

Kari Robideau:

Little shout out to our peeps in Wisconsin.

Betsy Olsen:

And Lancaster. Woohoo.

Kari Robideau:

Yeah. We've got some listeners in Wisconsin so we have to say hello.

Betsy Olsen:

It's true. And yeah, I loved my work there but I wanted to be in a little bit more of a metro area, which is why I moved to Minneapolis. My office is just north of Minneapolis in Andover. I am interested, I think mostly in evaluation because I am a person who thinks of about a thousand options for how you can do something. And so I need that evaluation and data to help me narrow those things into more practical realm. And so I think that's what has drawn me to evaluation. Because without that data, my thoughts and ideas are too broad to make practical. So evaluation has always kept me grounded in what I need to do for young people. So that's why I am drawn to it.

Kari Robideau:

I like that perspective. And I often use the word intentionality. It keeps you intentional about your work and you just referred to it as grounded. Well as you've already reviewed, you had talked about youth and adult partnerships and how we evaluate those. But this time we're talking more about the youth and youth voice. So how we incorporate that youth voice as part of our evaluation strategy. How does this play into high quality programming?

Betsy Olsen:

Yeah, well there are a number of ways that youth voice really is required in order to do that quality youth programming, because without the input and the feedback of young people, we really have a hard time constructing effective ways for individual youth in our program to grow. And without allowing them really meaningful choices, they disengage from our programs. And without a building of leadership and that intentional growth for the young people in our program, and with that leadership has to come additional say in our program. They will, again, become disengaged and move on as they get older. So it's critical to provide quality programming at every stage of a young person's life, which as you know in 4H we really are K-12, and so as those young people grow and develop, finding new ways to embed their voice in to our program is as challenging. And I think evaluation gets forgotten as one of the ways that you can do that. There are both informal and formal ways with an evaluation that you can really make youth heard in your program and act on the things that you hear.

Kari Robideau:

And you're going to share three of those strategies with us today to ensure that we put that voice from our young people in our programs. I'm wondering if you will describe those three for us and give us examples, because as you said, many of us know this, we know we need youth voice, we know we need to keep them actively engaged and have high quality programs. But I like it when we have that piece that we can apply and take with us, a toolkit of sorts that is like, "Ah, I can do that." And then I am intentionally evaluating youth voice in my program. We know that we should do this, but examples of how.

Kari Robideau:

Your first one is to provide input and feedback.

Betsy Olsen:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kari Robideau:

Give us your thoughts on that.

Betsy Olsen:

Yeah, and I think that's the first thing that comes to mind when you think about evaluation, right? It's a way of collecting input and feedback from the stakeholders of your program. In this case youth. But there are ways beyond just interviews or surveys that we can collect those things and getting young people involved at the beginning of the evaluation process can really build this piece into your program. Because as you said, Kari, so many of us are in youth work not to look at spreadsheets but instead to interact with young people and work, do the work. And so, one way that you can do that is doing an evaluation project with your youth. Get them to develop the questions. What do they want to know from the other young people in your program about the outcomes that are coming out? What are they curious about? What do they think? What kind of questions do they want to know from each other?

Betsy Olsen:

So that's one way to sort of turn that typical evaluation at the end of the program into a real opportunity to hear youth voices.

Kari Robideau:

So really what you're talking about there is making it an activity where you're engaging them and getting input from them, almost an activity or a game.

Betsy Olsen:

Exactly, yeah. You can do things like voting with Legos, building a little house or something that makes this more interactive. We've made Duplo bar charts in some of the youth programs that I've worked in. Having interactive evaluation practices is one way to get those really young youth voices involved. Little buckets filled with candy and that's how they decide yes or no, what they want to pursue next or strongly agreed, agree, you know those candy buckets with it say those things on it. Really is a much more fun way than a survey at the end to collect just on the fly data. But with your older youth, getting them involved in developing those questions and what they want to know, as I said, is really one of the key ways of embedding youth voice in evaluation.

Kari Robideau:

All right, well your second one is make relevant and meaningful choices.

Betsy Olsen:

Right. And we don't always think of this as an evaluation practice. This is a strong part of quality as we all know of quality youth programs that youth need to be making both choices about what sort of content they're learning about, but also about how they work with that content. That's one of the indicators of quality. And as that connects with evaluation, we need to not only consider evaluating the content choices that we provided young people with, but finding ways to have them involved early in the choice. So before we are asking them, "Do you guys want to go sledding or bowling?" At our next meeting, we are involving them in creating choices about, "How can we have more fun at our meetings? How can we make choices about the schedule of the meeting? How the entire year flows?" They need to be involved in making really meaningful choices. And those can be a part of your evaluation strategy and a part of

how you collect feedback from young people, building those choices and mechanisms into your program throughout the year.

Kari Robideau:

So give us some examples of how we might do that. What are activities that we use that fosters that choice?

Betsy Olsen:

Right, so it can often start at the beginning of the year involving young people in annual program planning. So just looking at the year, breaking it down, but we want to make sure that their choices go beyond just what they have already seen us do for many years. So it really means brainstorming and brainstorming in a way that you really write down every crazy choice that comes out. Those things indicate that you're interested in youth voice and that you're interested in engaging with it in a nonjudgmental way. So you're not already thinking of the seven reasons why they can't go to Valley Fair for Christmas fun. That sounds awful, yes. But you hear the idea, you ask about why that's of interest, you are breaking down helping them break down the things that they want to do and finding ways for them to embed those into the annual plan so that you find out, "Well they really want to go to Valley Fair in December because they feel all trapped up in the winter and there's just not a lot of outside fun to do." Well, let's think of some outdoor fun options that are a little bit more realistic for our group or...

Betsy Olsen:

Those kinds of things really help young people just sort of step through and know that you're listening and wanting them to have their choices as a part of the discussion.

Kari Robideau:

Now for anybody listening, Valley Fair's an outdoor amusement park in Minnesota, not happening real easily, especially at Christmas time.

Betsy Olsen:

Not really a winter activity, no.

Kari Robideau:

It's not really a winter activity, but going back to what you were saying, what I'm hearing you give the example of is let them have all the input and then guide them in helping them distinguish what is doable, what isn't, "Maybe we go to Valley Fair in the summer instead of the Winter." That kind of thing. But getting their input on it. As you give that example, I work with 4H club and that's something we've worked to do. And one of the things you said was, when you've worked with a group of young people for a period of time, you can start with them giving all of the ideas and we had the experience of a new group that needed us to help them generate first. So maybe your thoughts on that. That we need to be ready both ways to help. I don't know if young people are always used to being asked. So it's helping them learn that, "No, I really do want to know what you're thinking and what you want."

Betsy Olsen:

Yeah. And we think of young people as very creative and some of them are. But they also typically are going to fall back to the things that they have seen, especially if it's the amount of time provided for

them to brainstorm or think about it is short, then they're going to verify that what they want to do is either sledding or bowling, because that's what they know the typical choices are. So they will feed them back to you. But really in order to hear their actual choices and expand the plan a little bit more, you need to give them time. And sometimes yes, you do need to feed them a couple of ideas to get those gears moving because they're restricted by what they've seen before also. So really letting them think through the problem and think through that guided decision making process, what they really want from the activity, they want to spend time together, they want to have some social time, they want to have yummy snacks. Let them think through what they really want from the experience so that you can help them get to those core pieces so that their choices make sense.

Kari Robideau:

All right. Relevant and meaningful choices even when they seem crazy to us as adults. The third one that you're sharing with us today is leadership opportunities should include increasing levels of challenge and responsibility over time.

Betsy Olsen:

Exactly. As young people grow in leadership, their voice in the programming should also grow and that's something that can be difficult to build in, especially if you're working with young people from an early age, it's hard to sort of gauge where they are in their leadership growth and trust them to be the decision makers in our program. But that's critical to keep them engaged long-term. And as we know, it's the length of the experience that really helps young people have that full development through our programs. So that it's critical to let their voice be a part of things. So they're not just brainstorming ideas when they get into the high school age, they're controlling when those ideas are collected and how. They're not just developing questions that they want to know from others. They're developing the reasons why they want to know those questions. They're developing not just the agenda, but the annual plan. You really have to just keep moving the bar up and seeing if they reach it and being there to support them if they're not quite ready. It takes a lot of planning on our part, but it's critical, like I said, to keep them engaged long-term.

Betsy Olsen:

And evaluation can really help with that, using those evaluation tools like individual interviews or focus groups of your older youth, having them decide what they want to do with the survey results. So half your club thought that sledding was a great idea and half of the club thought that the sledding was a bad idea. What do we do? Your youth leaders can be the people who decide how to move forward. Do we ask again? Do we take half the group sledding? Those sorts of meaningful contributions to the group can be really led by working through the evaluation process with your young people.

Kari Robideau:

Can you give us a specific example of where you've seen this really work and maybe it's incorporating all three. Because as I'm listening to you talk through all three of them, they seem to build on each other and where have you seen this work as an evaluation tool? Give us a case study.

Betsy Olsen:

Sure. So one of the ways is that we have a showcase event for one of our afterschool programs. So the young people, we have a quarterly showcase event for them. They work on their project for three months and then they showcase it to family and friends, mostly family, and their friends from in the

group to [inaudible 00:18:24] they'll ask questions at the end, and sometimes those questions really spark new thoughts. So one of the practices that we have used is doing individual interviews with young people after they give their demonstration. "What do you want to do next quarter?" Become a built in evaluation tool, but then it also is a way for them to set a goal for that next, right in that moment as they have just tied up their last one, what's next? And then holding them, reminding them of that goal as they move through the next quarter.

Betsy Olsen:

And as the young people have grown older in the program, they have been the ones doing that interview with the younger members. So they help the younger members form a goal that's realistic for the next quarter. And so those are the sort of practices that build and really combine all of these pieces, because then those goals help you construct the learning presentations that you want to do over the next quarter. If most of the goals are around getting better at public speaking, those are the sort of learning things that you will bring into the sessions. If most of those goals are around building better relationships with their teammates, those are the sort of activities you're going to do in that next quarter. So that's one way that you can really collect young people's input, have them see that that input leads to really meaningful and relevant choices in the next quarter and providing young people a leadership role by having them move from interviewee to interviewer.

Kari Robideau:

Betsy, thank you for that example, and for all of the examples that you've given us that are practical and valuable ways, they're the how we do this. Could you spend a little time telling us now we've been intentional, we have collected youth voice data from our programs. What do we do? How do we use this youth input?

Betsy Olsen:

Yeah well I think there are really critical ways that we need to make sure that we are sort of pushing these through but without our own biases and assumptions coming in. Because one of the hardest parts of embedding youth voice into our programs is our ideas about what youth can do and the restrictions that we put on young people in that way. And so we definitely want to make sure that we don't assume that program participants and programs have to be a certain way when the reality is that they can grow and expand in a lot of different ways. So it's really about checking our assumptions about our program and our participants and making sure that they're facts rather than just assumptions. So it's being a little bit more open to the various ideas that young people are bringing to the table. And it also means that we have to act when we hear recommendations from our survey, we need to take steps to make those things happen. If three quarters of the young people we find out did not like sledding, we need to stop sledding.

Kari Robideau:

No.

Betsy Olsen:

I know, we love it.

Kari Robideau:

And the one thing I'm loving about your examples is we're obviously in winter in Minnesota here, but yeah, absolutely.

Betsy Olsen:

It's true. Yes. As I see the snow flying, all of my examples are around snow activities. So-

Kari Robideau:

But if that isn't where young people are at we can't keep doing it.

Betsy Olsen:

Exactly.

Kari Robideau:

Yeah.

Betsy Olsen:

Yeah. We need to identify recommendations from the input that we give. We can't just hear input and not take action. That is one way to significantly disengage young people from our program and from giving input in the future. And then we end up in a situation where we say, "I asked them what they want, but they don't tell me." And so they will tell you if they know that you're going to act on it. And then identifying strategies that can respond to those recommendations. So not just, as I said, not just hearing the input and saying, "Oh, we can't do that." It's hearing it, breaking it down and making sure that we act upon those things. And then making sure that they know that the next year when you are doing something different, that that came from their input. "I heard you say this, so we took these steps and now we're here." Because that cycle isn't always clear to young people. That, "We're doing this now, because you said this before. This is a direct result of what you suggested, the choices that you made. And if it's not working, we can make new choices." But making sure that the connection is made between what they're saying and what you're doing.

Kari Robideau:

Betsy, thank you for sharing these practical strategies that I think all youth workers can use and that you're challenging us to empower youth by letting their voice be heard in our programs and thinking about that as an evaluation plan. I thank you for bringing evaluation back into our intentionality.

Betsy Olsen:

Yes, I think we all use it in a lot of various ways, but we forget about the formalization of it and stepping it through with young people. So I'm happy to help people make that happen.

Kari Robideau:

Well thanks. And as we bring this podcast to an end, know that this conversation doesn't have to end here. Come find us at www.extension.umn.edu/youth. You're going to find research training and events that we offer in youth development and you can check out our Minnesota 4H program. We also have a youth development insight blog, and Betsy has a number of entries about evaluating youth programs

and we invite you to engage and comment on the research and programs that Betsy and our other colleagues are working on.

Kari Robideau:

That will wrap up this podcast. This is Kari Robideau from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Please tune in again soon.