

Utilizing Youth Participatory Evaluation for 4-H Program Improvement

Abstract

Minnesota 4-H Youth Development staff facilitated a Youth Participatory Evaluation project of youth-adult teams in the NW region. The project drew upon Youth Participatory Evaluation methods, youth-adult partnerships, and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory. From the pilot project, we found that young people, when supported by adults, have a successful experience in evaluating programs that are personal to them. We also found that this work has potential to change the quality of clubs across the NW region by deepening the engagement of adults and youth through evaluation work. We conclude that similar projects could serve as a gateway for inviting youth's voice and their meaningful engagement in 4-H clubs.

INTRODUCTION

Leaders in the field of Youth Participation Evaluation developed the following definition as well as a core set of principles:

Youth participation in community evaluation research involves young people in knowledge development at the community level. The process includes efforts by adults to involve young people in the research or evaluation of public agencies and private institutions; by young people to organize their own research or evaluation projects; and by youth and adults to work together in intergenerational relationships [Checkoway et al., 2003].¹

For the context of this paper, I define Youth Participatory Evaluation (YPE) projects as an intentional process for youth and adults to evaluate the program they are a part of. Such projects lend itself to giving youth voice and making program improvements. YPE projects draw from the Vygotskian Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which introduces people to reach outside their known skill sets and to learn through performing new roles in supported ways. Youth and adults develop new skill sets through evaluation training and then are given the new role of evaluator and coach within their program.

Within these contexts, I offer that youth and adults can work together to constantly improve the quality and experiences in the program. New roles and responsibilities created for the youth often emerge as a result of YPE projects. Because of the many opportunities for development, youth are engaged for longer periods of time (Sabo, 2003). Youth participatory evaluation leads to higher quality programs because youth voice is recognized and utilized. Youth have a strong sense of ownership of the program and a strong partnership with the adults involved.

¹ As cited in: Sabo Flores, K. (2008). Youth Participatory Evaluation Strategies for Engaging Youth People. Jossey-Bass. © 2015 Regents of the University of Minnesota. All rights reserved. University of Minnesota Extension is an equal opportunity educator and employer. In accordance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, this material is available in alternative formats upon request. Direct requests to 612-624-2116. ♻️ Printed on recycled and recyclable paper with at least 10 percent postconsumer waste material.

Sabo's research found that through youth participatory evaluation, youth learned many specific evaluation and program development skills, but what the youth found most exciting was their new relationships with one another, with adults, and with the broader community (Sabo, 2003). Research states five benefits to youth who are involved in YPE projects:

- Social competencies - Youth learn to interact and handle new situations. Build teamwork and sense of responsibility.
- Civic competencies - Youth increase social responsibility and civic leadership.
- Self-Confidence - Youth learn skills in public speaking, talking with others and interviewing. They gain confidence that they have knowledge and insight.
- Social Capital - Youth build new relationships with peers and adults.
- Identity Exploration - Youth take on new roles as researchers, evaluators and action planners, broadening their perspective and sense of empowerment (Sabo, 2008).

Youth Participatory Evaluation projects have the potential to significantly impact youth and adults involved in the 4-H club program. To explore how youth participatory evaluation can be applied in 4-H Clubs, the northwest region Extension Educator team created an authentic leadership opportunity for older youth and assessed the impact it has on 4-H clubs using the YPQA quality assessment tool. This article describes some of the learning from the effort.

METHODS

Local 4-H program staff were invited to bring older youth together to be trained to use the David P. Weikert Center's Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA) and become a local Quality Coach to focus program improvement efforts. A total of five youth worked with two adult volunteers and two staff to complete eight assessments over a five month period. This covered three county 4-H programs. This project was one of four pilots throughout the state of Minnesota. During this time information was collected about the training and participant's overall experience of participating in this YPE pilot project through surveys and interviews. Qualitative data was analyzed by looking for trends, themes were noted and suggestions for improvements were stated. The results from this process are outlined below.

FINDINGS

One of the most significant findings from the state survey was that participants in the NW Minnesota Youth as Assessors project felt there was shared leadership among all members of the team. This was described in how youth and adults drew conclusions together from the data, determined the best way to share the results, and engaged together in discussion about improvement. Further, youth noted that they felt listened to and an equal partner in the process. A staff member involved in this project stated "this was a wonderful opportunity for youth/adult partnerships"

The survey also found that participants developed evaluation skills and increased their confidence in sharing and using data to make change in the 4-H program. All participants believed

that evaluation and data can be useful in many areas of life. A participant stated, “I am noticing things more, even in my own club.”

One area for further support was skills developed around being objective observers. Although the training spends time teaching and reflecting on how to be more objective, the survey data showed that this was a skill participants needed to improve on. This is not entirely surprising as observational method is a complex skill in evaluation. However, it is interesting to note that even in the short amount of time youth were involved in this project, they developed the attitude that evaluation is something they can do.

Overall, this project increased the confidence of participants to do program improvement through the Youth Program Quality Assessment. The adults and youth involved developed a new opportunity for partnership that assisted 4-H clubs in making improvements to their program.

IMPLICATIONS

Implication: Youth Participatory Evaluation is a way to involve youth in a high quality program by involving youth in the reflection and planning process of the organization. YPE also gives youth voice in the programs they are involved in.

From this pilot project, staff offer that YPE is a strategy to give youth voice as well as reach the top domains of a quality program within a 4-H club program. In Minnesota 4-H, Weikert’s Youth Program Quality Assessment tool is utilized as the framework for defining and assessing program quality. This tool has four domains - safe environment, supportive environment, interaction and engagement - and they build upon each other. Two indicators of interaction are youth/adult partnership and leadership. In a YPE project, youth and adults partner together to complete the evaluation. Youth give leadership to the discovery process and sharing the evaluation results with others. The engagement domain is described as making plans and reflecting on their experience. Utilizing a quality program assessment, like the YPOA tool, requires making action plans based on the data for program improvement. Thus, youth reflect and help create action plans in their program.

Quality youth development programs stretch young people and assist them to go beyond themselves as described by Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development theory. Quality programs do more than build on youth’s strengths, but supply them with opportunities to explore entirely new ways of being in the world, to create new roles, new attitudes and new actions (Sabo, 2003). YPE projects have the potential to change the youth’s relationship within the program as well as the broader community.

Implication: Youth Participatory Evaluation is a strategy to engage youth in an authentic leadership experience. It gives youth new skills and roles within a program as evaluator, coach, and partner.

The field of Youth Participatory Evaluation has named several benefits of youth participating in evaluation projects (see page 2). It is evident from this project that by engaging

youth in evaluation work of programs, youth learn skills in evaluation, communication, and program improvement strategies. As a result young people developed self-confidence. By conducting program quality observations, youth developed observation skills, writing objective evidence, developing improvement plans, and communicating data within teams and with others. Youth that are trained have new roles within the 4-H program and are thought of as evaluator and coach. By taking on these new roles, youth gained self-confidence by learning new skills, successfully implementing them and being recognized for their new knowledge. As youth complete this process more often, they become more confident in the process. They also use their new knowledge in other aspects of their life.

Implication: Adults (staff & volunteers) play an important role in the success of a YPE project. Educating adults about YPE and their role as a facilitator is an important component of an YPE project.

Having a caring adult support youth throughout a project is an important component of any youth development program. To be successful, adults need to value young people as advisors and leaders, and provide authentic opportunities to engage and advise outcomes in the community (Richards-Schuster, 2012). A statement from an adult involved in the NW YPE project stated “Youth are possibly the best evaluators because their thoughts/vision are not clouded with history of the club.” Youth bring a fresh view of what is happening in a club and adults need to listen to what youth say.

When designing a YPE project one should consider Zeldin, O’Connor and Camino’s recommendations on the roles adults can and should play in the Youth Participatory Evaluation projects:

- Setting the stage by selecting and training youth researchers.
- Provide access to resources needed for the project and advocate for youth involvement.
- Partner with the youth to develop and implement the project - collecting data, analyzing & interpreting data and reporting the results.
- Reflect regularly throughout the process with the youth researchers to provide feedback, guidance and opportunities for reflection.
- Do good youth work - build relationships with youth researchers and ensure a positive experience that develops leadership skills.

Youth Development staff and volunteers need to be prepared to partner with youth to make program improvements. 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 (White, D.; Shoffner, A.; Johnson, K.; Knowles, N.; Mills, M, 2012).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to utilize YPE to engage youth in local evaluation work. We need to continue to offer older youth the opportunity to be involved in Youth Participatory Evaluation projects within their county or region. This provides an avenue for youth to improve the program they are involved in, which develops their skills as a leader within the program.
- Adult training and expectations for how to partner with youth. Ensuring the adults involved are supportive of youth participatory evaluation through club program improvement observations should include education capacity building and specific expectations of adults.
- Explore year 2 role for youth evaluators. The continuing dilemma is to sustain these groups beyond the first cycle of collecting data and program improvement. The issue of time and guidance with current staff structures is a deterrent to long term sustainability.
- Staff Role Assignment. Having a staff person dedicated to coordinating a club program improvement plan within a multi-county area could potentially sustain this effort. This staff person would coordinate the training of teams of youth and adults to become Quality Coaches within their program. This staff person would also provide the support needed to teams after a club observation is complete. This includes analyzing the data, pulling out themes and planning for sharing the data. The busy schedules of youth and adults can make scheduling these tasks difficult so a staff person with a flexible schedule may have more success. This staff person would also build a relationship with the teams and develop a plan with the teams to continue their evaluation efforts throughout the program.

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