



YOUTH AND ADULT LEADERS FOR PROGRAM EXCELLENCE

Youth Participation in Research and Evaluation: Outcomes for Youth

Community Youth Connection
Issue Brief

Prepared by Cailin O'Connor
and Linda Camino

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The practice of engaging youth in research and evaluation is fairly new. It has emerged from several fields: action research and evaluation, participatory research, community development, and positive youth development.

Since the practice is new, a literature review (Zeldin, O'Connor, & Camino, 2005) was conducted, addressing the question: *What are the outcomes for youth when they participate in research and evaluation projects?* Both practice and research-based manuscripts were reviewed. The settings for the research and evaluation projects ranged from youth-serving programs, to classrooms and schools, to neighborhoods and communities.

The literature review found that, across these contexts, youth gained important skills and made valuable connections as a result of their experiences as researchers and evaluators. These outcomes are summarized in this issue brief, with additional resources on youth as researchers and evaluators listed at the end.

Youth outcomes occur in the following areas:

Social Competencies

- Young people learn how to interact with different kinds of people in different situations.
- Researching and evaluating program and community conditions helps youth develop empathy for, and understanding of, other people's perspectives.
- Research and evaluation work is typically conducted in teams. Working in teams helps youth gain a sense of collective responsibility.

Civic Competencies

- Young people learn about the social, cultural, economic, and historical conditions surrounding their programs and communities.
- Learning about these conditions tends to spur young people to an increased sense of social responsibility to help improve community life.
- As they make decisions about the direction of the research project, present results, and make action plans based on the data, young people also gain civic leadership skills, including communication, outreach, and advocacy skills.

Self-Confidence

- Youth gain confidence as they conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups, write reports, and speak publicly about the results.
- Youth develop confidence that they have knowledge and insight to contribute to research and evaluation, grounded in their program and/or neighborhood experience.

Social Capital

- Through the research project, youth broaden their horizons through exposure to new places, people, and ideas.
- Youth gain two types of new or deepened relationships with community peers and adults: (1) relationships with peers and adults who work with them as co-researchers and evaluators, and (2) peers and adults they come into contact with when collecting data and presenting the results.
- These connections and relationships can help with future opportunities in other programs, internships, employment, education, and mentoring.

Identity Exploration

- By taking on new roles as researchers, evaluators, and action planners, youth broaden a sense of who they are, and who they can become.
- Youth gain a sense of empowerment by seeing themselves as experts, investigative reporters, and change agents.
- Youth clarify personal goals as a result of experiencing autonomy, gaining skills related to research, and participating in decision-making.

Research, Critical Thinking, and Problem-Solving Skills

- Youth learn concrete skills related to developing research questions, and methods to collect, analyze, and present data.
- Youth also increase skills in project organization, from conceptualizing a research and evaluation project, to carrying it through, to leading change and improvement based on the results.
- Young people learn aspects of critical thinking: identifying and challenging assumptions, seeing the world from a variety of perspectives, and exploring alternatives.
- Young people gain lessons about the practical issues of program and community development, such as the need for ongoing assessment, use of multiple forms of measurement, and inclusion of multiple stakeholder views.
- Youth increase skills in problem-solving when confronted with issues that arise in the research process. For example, youth researchers must determine how to collect data while preserving confidentiality, how to recognize the difference between description and interpretation, and how to strategize alternatives when challenges arise that prevent them from proceeding as originally planned.

The tools and activities contained in *Youth and Adult Leaders for Program Excellence: A Practical Guide for Program Assessment and Action Planning* are grounded in the outcomes resulting from youth participation in research and evaluation. The guide is designed to lead youth-adult teams through all phases of program assessment: planning the research, collecting, analyzing, and presenting data, and action planning for improvement

More information about the resource kit, including information about how you can purchase one to use in your organization, is available from <http://www.actforyouth.net/>.

Reference

Zeldin, S., O'Connor, C., & Camino, L. (2005). *Youth participation in research and evaluation*. University of Wisconsin – Madison. Unpublished manuscript.

Additional Resources

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Horsch, K., Little, P., Smith, J.D., Goodyear, L., & Harris, E. (2002). Youth involvement in evaluation and research. *Issues and Opportunities in Out-Of-School Time Evaluation: Harvard Family Research Project*, 1, 1-8.
www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/afterschool/resources/issuebrief1.html

Sabo, K. (Ed.) (2003). Youth participatory evaluation: A field in the making. *New Directions for Evaluation*, 98. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.