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"Keeping it Real": An Evaluation Audit of Five Years of Youth-led Program Evaluation

Jeffrey J. Bulanda
Aurora University, jbulanda@aurora.edu

Katie Szarzynski
Huntley High School, kszarzynski@district158.org

Daria Silar
Grand Valley State University

Katherine Tyson McCrea
Loyola University Chicago, ktyson@luc.edu

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An Evaluation Audit of Five Years of Youth-Led Program Evaluation[1]

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Jeffrey J. Bulanda, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., Assistant Professor
Aurora University School of Social Work

Katie Szarzynski, M.S.W.
School Social Worker, Huntley High School, District 158

Daria Silar,
Grand Valley State University and Alumna of Stand Up Help Out!

Katherine Tyson McCrea, Ph.D., L.C.S.W.
Professor, Loyola University of Chicago School of Social Work

"Keeping It Real:"

An Evaluation Audit of Five Years of Youth-Led Program Evaluation

Abstract

Youth are increasingly seen as competent in participating in research and program evaluation, two activities previously reserved for adults. This paper is a report of the findings from an evaluation audit of Stand Up! Help Out!, a participatory action after-school youth leadership development program for disadvantaged urban youth that utilized youth evaluations to develop a best practices service model. The youths' feedback assisted providers in improving services so that youth engagement in the program was 99% (by comparison with national highs of 79%). Here, we describe an important aspect of the process of youth-led program evaluation leading to such high youth engagement: How youth interviewed each other so as to optimize the authenticity of their program evaluations and contributions to program design. Drawing from over five years of program evaluation data collected by youth, the authors report on the youths' experiences as informants and co-researchers, consider strategies used to help youth best describe their experiences in the program, and describe implications for other settings looking to incorporate youth-led program evaluation. Youth-led program evaluation has considerable promise for helping service providers make programs more meaningful for disadvantaged youth.

Keywords: After-school youth programs, program evaluation, qualitative evaluation, youth-led program evaluation

"Keeping It Real:"

An Evaluation Audit of Five Years of Youth-Led Program Evaluation

"Keeping it real: speaking your mind; not beating around the bush; speak what you feel; don't hold back" (Teen participants' definition of research)

Introduction

To maximally serve young people and address the bias of adultcentrism (Petr, 1992), which limits the relevance of social services for young clients, social workers need to find ways to encourage youth to communicate their priorities and evaluations of services. Kozol (2001) writes,

> People rarely speak of children at these [professional] conferences. You hear of "cohort groups" and "standard variations," but you don't hear much of boys who miss their cats or six-year-olds who have to struggle with potato ball. If a bunch of kids like Elio and Pineapple were seated at the table, it would seem a comical anomaly. Statistical decorum would be undermined by the particularities of all these uncontrollable and restless little variables (p. 136-137).

Encouraging disadvantaged youth to communicate authentically and co-create and evaluate their services across barriers of race, class, age, and potentially gender is both necessary in order to carry out effective social work practice, but also not easily accomplished. This paper reports on what we learned about engaging youth as co-researchers in the context of a longstanding participatory action project co-creating counseling and after-school leadership support services with disadvantaged urban African-American youth. Social workers can use these findings to develop youth-led program evaluations, and also when considering evaluation research design issues, especially with disadvantaged youth. This paper sheds light on how social work program evaluations can benefit youth and also meet scientific standards.

The need for involving disadvantaged young people in services is significant, as the great majority are not participating in preventive and therapeutic services that could help them overcome the significant challenges they face (Deschenes et al., 2010; Kazdin, 2003). A participatory action

approach to developing and evaluating services has had promise in reducing youths' social

exclusion and increasing their participation (Maccran, Ross, Hardy & Shapiro, 1999), and so for the

past seven years we have applied participatory action processes to develop and evaluate an after

school leadership development program for disadvantaged African-American urban youth (Stand

Up Help Out, or SUHO, see www.standuphelpout.org). Participatory action is

> a research process that systematically engages the stakeholders associated with specific
>
> problems in an inquiry that includes problem definition, developing methods of data
>
> collection, carrying out data analysis and writing up findings. Stakeholders (including those
>
> traditionally called researchers) define their roles together, collaboratively (Tyson McCrea,
>
> 2012, p. 15).

Incorporating planned change and reflection upon it into the research process, participatory action

research is profoundly democratic, "a social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of

people who join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared social

world" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563). Using participatory action methods, we have been

able to significantly improve youth engagement, which also means social workers can benefit from

disadvantaged African American young people's insights into program design. As we incorporated

client feedback, program attendance rates improved and as of 2011 averaged 99% (the highest

attendance rates reported in a nationwide sample of after-school programs for youth were 79%,

Deschenes et al., 2010).

Elsewhere, we have described qualitative findings about the service element youth

experience as most meaningful (Bulanda, 2008; Bulanda & Tyson McCrea, 2012). In this paper, we

use an evaluation audit approach to describe findings from five years of program evaluation about

1) how youth were engaged as program evaluators using a peer interview process, 2) central

features of the evaluation process, and 3) how pitfalls were overcome to maximize the authenticity

of youths' evaluations (or as one teenager said, how to "keep it real").

Youth can evaluate services in which they participate using both process and outcome

indicators (IDHS & ISBE, 2002). *Outcome indicators* seek to find the direct effects of participation

in the program. *Process evaluation,* on the other hand, is the "'who, what, when, where, and why'

questions that determine what seems to be working and builds off that information for program

improvement" (IDHS & ISBE, 2002, p. 22). A process evaluation then simultaneously addresses

how the research meets scientific standards. One form of process evaluation, in keeping with the

idea of "metaevaluation as imperative" (Shufflebeam, 2001), is an *evaluation audit,* which

"reviews the methodological steps and substantive and analytic decisions made in the evaluation for

adherence to professional standards, soundness of logic and judgment, and defensibility" (Greene,

Doughty, Marquart, Ray, & Roberts, 1988, p. 354). Designed to address concerns about

trustworthiness of qualitative evaluation research, an evaluation audit does not replicate study

findings, but yields information about the process of carrying out the study's methodology

(Aakerman, Admiraal, Brekelmans & Oost, 2008; Greene et al., 1988). A variety of strategies can

be used in conducting an evaluation audit, but a central feature is developing an *audit trail*: a

detailed description of procedures used throughout the evaluation, including the evaluation proposal,

final report, raw and processed data, and descriptions of the process of data gathering and analysis

(Aakerman et al., 2008, p. 266). The audit reviewers

> immers[e] themselves in the audit trail materials, reading and rereading records, keeping
> notes and questions as they proceeded, developing and refining impressions and judgments,
> and seeking clarification and additional materials. The auditors needed to focus
> simultaneously on assessing the integrity of both the process and content of the evaluations
> (Greene et al, 1988, p. 365).

Greene et al (1988) further suggest involving evaluation stakeholders (in this case, for instance, the youth participants) to compensate for auditor biases. Some evaluation audits are carried out by persons completely independent of the ongoing service and research process. However, the externality of auditors is no guarantee of authenticity, and an "insider's perspective" also has much to offer (Tyson McCrea, 2012). Accordingly, here we triangulated perspectives to regulate bias, including one author not involved with services or previous research (KS), along with a program instructor and researcher (JB), a youth participant in the program who (by definition) also was a co-researcher (DS), and the PI (KTM). This evaluation team reviewed program evaluations conducted from 2006-2011.

Background

Benefits of Youth-led Research and Program Evaluation

Participatory evaluation is increasingly valued by community-based organizations that are seeking practical outcomes from research (Baker & Bruner, 2010; Checkoway, Doobie, & Richards-Schuster,2003; Delgado, 2006; Sabo Flores, 2008), and recently youth in particular are recognized as making important contributions in decisions about the programs designed to serve them (Fetterman, 2003; Horsch et al., 2002; London et al, 2003; Sabo Flores, 2008; Youth in Focus, 2002). Among the benefits of including youth in program evaluation processes are that providers can benefit from the youths' opinions about best practices, and the evaluation process itself can be empowering and develop the skills, competence, and autonomy of the youth participants. Adolescent leaders of program evaluations develop social and civic competencies, self-confidence, increased social capital, identity exploration, knowledge acquisition, job readiness skills, and increased reflectiveness (Sabo Flores, 2008, pp. 11-14). In a youth-led research process, youth are treated as partners who, with adult support, can make significant contributions (Sabo Flores, 2008).

A partnership orientation can protect the research process from being tainted by negative

assumptions about disadvantaged youth. YPE solidifies partnerships between youth and adult

service providers by helping providers gain a sound understanding of the youths' perspectives,

generating knowledge to inform program development, and potentially changing social structures as

youth are motivated to take direct action to influence program providers and policy-makers (Sabo

Flores, 2008). When youth involved are isolated from power structures because of several layers of

disadvantage (in SUHO, racial discrimination, poverty, and educational deprivations), remedying

their social exclusion is especially important. The benefits of YPE for social science knowledge are

plentiful, as youth researchers contribute invaluable information, creative insights, and evidence for

their strengths that otherwise would be unavailable.

As of this writing, youth participatory evaluations (YPE) have been conducted in several

fields of research including health, child welfare, school systems, non-profit youth programs, and

international initiatives (Keenan, 2007; Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2002; Ozer et al.,

2008; Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Suleiman, Soleimanpour, & London, 2006; Yang, 2009). Youth

have been included in research in a variety of ways including focus groups, administering surveys,

and conducting observations (Bagnoli, & Clark, 2010; Black, 2006; Tupuola, 2006). While youth-

led research has been reported for almost thirty years, and a number of curricula are available

describing ways to train youth in research and program evaluation (Checkoway & Richards-

Schuster, 2005; Sabo Flores, 2008; Youth in Focus, 2002), discussion of the youths' experiences as

informants and co-researchers is limited. Horsch, Little, Smith, et al. (2002) advise that: "youth are

given initial, well-defined tasks and gradually take on more, depending on their motivation, their

time, and their ability to take on tasks by themselves" (p. 3).

Researchers also recognized limitations with YPE. Administrators involved in the research projects were "reluctant to cede control to students" (Black, 2006, p. 35; not a problem in our experience), or struggled to accept students' proposed ideas for school policy change (Ozer et al., 2008). Some adolescents were reluctant to meet for interviews with adults and many did not show up for their interviews (Keenan, 2007). YPE needs to maximize youths' follow-through and impact on program results.

The After School Youth Leadership Development Program: Stand Up! Help Out!

The adolescent leadership development program, Stand Up Help Out! (SUHO), which is the context of this evaluation audit, serves African-American youth residing in urban, socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods. First funded in 2006, during a time of forced community fragmentation as public housing was being torn down and replaced with mixed-income housing to which most youths' families could not be admitted (Venkatesh & Celimli, 2004), SUHO focuses on helping youth respond actively and constructively to the many challenges of living in a poverty-level community. To develop youths' professional skills, SUHO treats program participation like employment: The apprentices interview for positions, are paid a stipend (averaging $400 when this research was conducted), and are expected to maintain professional conduct (per After School Matters, the program's primary funder since 2006). Summer programs last for six weeks and meet five days a week for four hours a day. School-year programs last 10 weeks and meet 3-4 days a week for a total of 9 hours per week.

SUHO is youth-led: Youth actively plan program goals and activities, evaluate the program, and contribute to future program design. SUHO youth have been remarkably productive. Initially, youth focused on studying and promoting alternatives to violence, and chose compassion specifically as their theme (see their book, *C.R.I.M.E.: Replacing Violence with Compassion,*

Respect, Inspiration, Motivation, and Empathy, Bulanda,, Kibblesmith, and Crime Teens, 2010).

They also conducted community health and safety fairs, went on college tours and developed their

resumes, authored a social skills curriculum for elementary school children, mentored children, and

created numerous documentaries.

Team building and leadership opportunities were essential for these accomplishments. A

weekly "sharing circle" enabled youth to share personal beliefs, stories, concerns ranging from

"favorite food" to "biggest insecurity," feedback about programming, and suggestions for future

planning.

The SUHO program prioritized providing supportive counseling to youth, especially those

who indicated they had been traumatized (verbally or non-verbally, i.e. by withdrawal or context-

inappropriate aggression). Instructors and counselors were M.S.W. school social workers and/or

graduate students in social work, who in turn received clinical supervision from a supervisor with

more than 25 years clinical social work experience with children and youth.[2] Instructors developed

goals for personal and professional development with the youth.

Involving the youth thoroughly in program design, evaluation, and proposal

conceptualization may have contributed to the program's appeal and youths' attendance, as SUHO

program attendance rates have consistently been between 90-99% (quite high compared to the

maximum participation rates of 70-70% reported by other after school programs, Deschenes et al.,

2010).   (In SUHO, attendance meant that students were only allowed three absences and were

expected to be punctual, carry out responsibilities, and handle peer relationships without fighting).

Whereas in Chicago in 2005, about twice as many youth applied for After School Matters Programs

as there were spaces available (Proscio & Whiting, 2004), SUHO regularly had four times as many

---

[2] SUHO instructors and interns thus had much more education and specific training in counseling, compared to most
after-school program instructors, whose highest educational credential tend to be high school diplomas (Halpern, 2006).

youth applying as could be accepted.   A review of the first two years of the program and evaluation

findings is also available (Bulanda, 2008).

Core Assumptions and Methodology in the Evaluation Audit of SUHO

Qualitative Methods to Maximize Fidelity to Youths' Priorities

Because qualitative approaches to program evaluation provide flexibility, a focus on

participants' subjective experiences, and serving both formative and outcome evaluation purposes

(Green, 1994; Shaw, 1999), we used qualitative methods in evaluating SUHO. Guba & Lincoln

(2000) describe scientific standards for qualitative program evaluation that comprise

trustworthiness: 1) To ascertain *credibility*, the research examines the "…similarity between data

of inquiry and phenomena data represented" (p. 376); 2) The standard of *transferability* refers to

whether results can be generalized to other settings. 3) *Dependability* pertains to the replicability of

the data-collection instrument(s). Finally, 4) *confirmability* addresses "the degree to which the

findings of an inquiry are a function solely of the conditions of the inquiry and not of the biases,

motivations, interests, or perspectives of the inquirer" (Ibid, p. 376).

The decision to rely on youth-conducted qualitative interviewers was made over the course

of a few years in order to meet standards of trustworthiness. A trial-and-error process made it clear

that the adult-led program evaluation used in the first three programs (Summer and Fall 2006 and

Spring 2007) was not adequately credible, dependable, transferable, and confirmable. Evaluating

outcome using standardized scales or adult-led questionnaires and interviews was greatly inferior in

depth, authenticity, and cultural competence (fidelity to the youths' vernacular and values) to the

information yielded by youths' interviews of each other. For instance, despite administering scales

in many different ways, including having youth read them to each other, youth completed the scales

rapidly and impatiently and told us the scales had little meaning for them. In sum, it was clear that

standardized scales did not elicit reliable or valid data. Moreover, in qualitative, youth-led

interviews youth were more likely to share feedback that surprised researchers, significantly

improving confirmability.

Youth generally took qualitative interviews seriously, sharing in-depth understandings of

themselves, their peers, their community, and what was meaningful and not helpful about the

SUHO program. The flexibility of qualitative interviews allowed youth to communicate in the

richness of their vernacular, and allowed the researcher to suggest that youth add points of inquiry

in response to emerging themes as data were collected. Further, since the qualitative data were

collected over a sustained time period, the researchers could study process and assess causality as it

took shape in the setting (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In short, to meet the standards of credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability, it became clear that qualitative interviews would

yield more robust findings than other methods.

In the adult-led program evaluations, the youth were given written questionnaires developed

by the program instructors, which elicited scant feedback. The teens said they would say more with

youth-led interviews. Since most youth were averse to writing, we shifted to tape-recorded

interviews co-developed and conducted by youth researchers. SUHO teens assisted in

conceptualizing the questions asked in the interview protocol and used that protocol to interview

their peers.

The selection of youth researchers involved a thorough assessment of each youth's strengths

and weaknesses. We drew from Delgado's (2006) characteristics for effective youth researchers:

1) embrace of innovation, 2) sense of humor, 3) critical thinking skills, 4) patience and persistence,

5) eagerness to learn about others and their communities, 6) flexibility to work alone and in groups,

7) resilience, and 8) communication skills across audiences. SUHO instructors provided a training

session to review key qualitative interviewing techniques, as well as ongoing feedback. To build the trustworthiness, specifically confirmability, of the research, youth assisted with data analysis to address potential adult bias in interpretation of data. The adult instructors coded the data based on emerging themes as well as predefined categories (Miles and Huberman, 1994), which were then presented to a small focus group of teens. This focus group also enlightened the instructors about the correct meaning of teens' vernacular.

Evaluation Audit Procedure

For the purpose of the evaluation audit, a total of 203 transcribed interviews were available for review; the program administrators reviewed all of the interviews, while the other members of the team reviewed at least 20% of them. Each team member also listened to at least 15 audio taped interviews to recognize voice tone and other qualities that cannot be adequately transcribed. The researchers noted effective strategies used to elicit information from informants, as well as situations when the informant and/or interviewer's behavior limited the utility of the interview. The youth member of the research team also conducted a focus group with youth who were participants in at least two programs to discuss their experiences as informants and/or interviewers. These data, along with data from interview questions about the experience of participating in an evaluation, were reviewed to consider best practice in YPE in SUHO.

<div align="center">

Findings

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Incorporating Youths' Feedback into Service Design

One of the central goals of evaluation is to elicit feedback for improvement as part of the formative evaluation. SUHO youths' feedback about what they did not like about the program was especially valuable. Instructors made programs more active and kept discussion times to shorter doses based on feedback that "A part I didn't enjoy: The boring part when we would just sit there

and talk" and "To me, this program is not gonna change what's happening in the community. Cuz

we did that little march for that day, and then as soon as we left, they were doing the same thing."

When teens wanted a larger stipend for participating in the program, understandable given their

considerable poverty, we sought more funding. Weekly sharing circles became a regular part of the

program in response to comments such as those by one young woman who wanted even more self-

expression and autonomy: "The majority of time we don't get to talk about how we really feel and

we have to hold back stuff and we shouldn't." Two of the teen leaders talked about "It doesn't feel

like a team. There's a lot of new people and there's cliques all over." Their solution to this

problem was "We need to learn more about each other." This suggestion was the impetus for using

more icebreakers, small group activities, and once again for the sharing circle. At the beginning of

the Fall, 2007 program, the instructors explained to the youth everything that was to be

accomplished. Some youth said, "Sometimes, it feels like we are taking on too much and then we

don't do the best job on it." In response to this concern, the group prioritized program activities.

Other ways in which instructors incorporated youths' feedback included:

- Youth suggested topics of documentaries and authored them;

- Youth suggested activities in mentoring children;

- Youth suggested changes in the work hours and breaks, and

- Youth developed the rules/discipline policies in the programs.

Youth Developed the Interview Process

The interview process was improved based on feedback from the youth and the instructors'

and PI's review of the data to evaluate its trustworthiness. Interview questions were modified as the

evaluation progressed, so that better questions could elicit more complete responses. The question

"Tell us something you did not enjoy" sometimes led to discussion of "boring" parts of the program,

such as writing projects or lectures. Interestingly, when in the focus group, the teens said they did

not enjoy some of those activities, but recognized their value. One youth said "The writing stuff felt

like I was in school and I hate writing, but I know I need to learn how to write if I want to go to

college." Asking specifically "Describe two or more changes you would make to the program"

elicited specific parts of the program to change. We strove to elicit negative comments. Even when

informants said they "enjoyed everything," we also asked "Why do you think some teens did not

come to the program everyday?" and found youth then more readily identified program drawbacks.

A minority of the youth were particularly brief in their interview and, thus, it was difficult to fully

understand their experiences in the program. More informal follow-up interviews with the

instructors, at times, were necessary to gain more complete data

Youth as Informants

The youth informants had diverse styles, and training interviewers to handle different

informant styles can improve data quality.   Below we describe the different informant styles and

how many fell into each category (N= 203).

The standard informant: The most common (N=133) is one who sufficiently answers the

question, but whose responses generally lack depth (i.e., a response to any question that is more

than one-two sentences), unless several follow-up questions are used by the interviewer. An

example of this informant:

> *Interviewer: How would you describe this program to someone?*
> *Informant: The program is very interesting, but sometimes it can be hard work.*
> *Interviewer: Why did you decide to join this program?*
> *Informant: For a new experience, to meet new people.*
> *Interviewer: Why did you decide to keep coming to it?*
> *Informant: I liked the people I met.*
> *Interviewer: Talk some about your favorite part of the program.*
> *Informant: The circle when we had the chance to share our feelings.*

The articulate informant: These informants (n=45) described their experiences and gave in-depth feedback without much prompting from the interviewer. These teens showed genuine investment in the interview process:

> *Interviewer: Why did you decide to join this program?*
> *Informant: I decided to join this program cause I like working with children and I feel like if you can catch them at a young stage and they are going down the wrong path, either I or somebody else can potentially change their way and make them go down the right path so pretty much it's just to work with the youth and try to make them be successful, try to help them become successful in the future.*

The inconsistent informant: A very few informants (n=2) wavered in their opinions throughout the interview:

> *"[I come to the program] cuz the money, that's it"* and *"I don't like when [the instructors] be giving us lectures and think that they know stuff;"* yet, later says *"I changed a lot [since starting in program]"* and *"It may seem like I'm not interested but I always take in what they be telling us."*

The playful informant: A few teens (n=6) had a difficult time seeing the value in the program evaluation and/or seemed more interested in eliciting a response from the interviewer:

"Yes, I had opportunities in my groups to be a leader. I feel I'm a leader of all of them to tell the truth. I feel I'm the captain, the king, the man, the leader man! I feel this is my after school matters to tell the truth." In this case, the teen was interviewed by a close friend and evidently felt comfortable expressing his enthusiasm without reservation. The advantage of more spontaneity produced by a friendship relationship is counterbalanced by the disadvantage that the informant feels less responsible for what s/he is saying.

Informants with learning disabilities: A few teens (n=7) in the program had significant learning disabilities, which led to them being limited in comprehending questions as well as verbally processing their responses. In these instances, many of the interviewers became frustrated and on one occasion stopped the interview prematurely:

> *Interviewer: What have you liked most?*

> *Informant: Helping the kids out*
> *Interviewer: What would you change?*
> *Informant: Nothing*
> *Interviewer: How did you feel about tutoring?*
> *Informant: I felt good about tutoring the kids.*
> *Interviewer: How do you think planning for the Health Fair went?*
> *Informant: It went OK cause we got to talk about the Health Fair.*

The apathetic informant: A few teens (n=6) showed apathy about the program evaluation, perhaps because they were significantly preoccupied with life stressors. When asked if instructors made changes in the program, one such informant responded, *"I ain't been paying attention,"* and gave limited responses throughout the interview.

The rushing informant: A few youth (n=2) proactively tried to rush through the interview by complaining about the length of the interview, having a rushed tone (i.e., *"I feel it was really good. That's all. Next question"*).

The nervous informant: Two of the respondents directly acknowledged being nervous about the interview process, and struggled articulating their experiences. In the following exchange, the interviewer sensed that the informant was nervous and tried to help the informant with it:

> *Interviewer: Okay, well thank you that's the end of the interview. Was it good? Were you nervous?*
> *Informant: Um, I was a little nervous about the questions, but I think that I did good.*

When the focus group was asked about how to maximize the data we collect, the group agreed that the interview should be "shorter…but not too short cause you want to get your opinions out." They agreed that the ideal interview would take about 6-10 minutes with a maximum of 10-12 questions. The focus group also suggested that informants be told interviews are confidential, that only the instructors and interviewer would know what was said, and that informants be told their input was important, "I feel you contribute a lot to the program and would like to know your ideas."

Youth as Interviewers

It became clear it was important to select interviewers carefully and give them basic training

on asking questions, building rapport, and handling different types of informants, while not

overdoing the training (which could compromise the interviewers' natural styles of communication).

A variety of interviewer personalities emerged.

The rapport-building interviewer: These teens were able to maintain a professional rapport

with the interviewer. Some used appropriate jokes to set the informant at ease and elicit a fuller

response:

> *Interviewer: How would you describe this program to someone?*
> *Participant: I would tell them it is a good program.*
> *Interviewer: How? Don't lie to me now! [playful tone]*
> *Participant: Because it provides you with college prep, a lot of information about college,*
> *we go on college tours, you help the kids, and you put together a documentary.*

Some offered reassurance and validation:

> *Interviewer: How would you describe this program to someone?*
> *Participant: It's a very helpful program. It keeps it positive. It helps out the community. It*
> *keeps you out of trouble.*
> *Interviewer: Alright, that's a good answer.*

The clarifier: One of the keys skills of a youth interviewer is the ability to clarify

respondent answers and use techniques to elicit full responses. Some interviewers summarized or

parroted the responses:

> *Interviewer: Talk some about a part of the program you did not enjoy.*
> *Participant: Some of the lectures.*
> *Interviewer: The lectures?*

Some interviewers were good at having the respondents give specific examples when initial

responses were vague.

> *Interviewer: Did you learn anything about yourself (or your capabilities) from this*
> *program?*

Participant: I learnt that I'm a lot smarter than I thought I was. That if I put my mind to it, I could do a lot of things.
Interviewer: So, it gave you a boost of confidence? Can you give some examples?
Participant: Like going to college tours and filling out all the resumes. I never did that before. At first, I didn't really want to go to college, but now I think it's a place for me in college.
Interviewer: I can relate to that.

In addition to knowing how to ask follow-up questions, the teens could clarify questions for the respondents and put questions in their own words.

Interviewer: What about the conflict resolution program would you change?
Participant: What do you mean?
Interviewer: Like some of the stuff that didn't go right. What would you change?
Participant: What didn't go right?
Interviewer: Like if something didn't go right.

Interviewer: How do you feel the instructors helped you?
Participant: Can you explain that?
Interviewer: Like do you think the instructors helped you through tough times or just helped you with stuff?

When interviewers helped develop the interview questions, they were more able to help informants give more complete responses. In a majority of interviews, the interviewer fell into the "clarifier" and/or "rapport-building" categories (N=189).

The leading interviewer: In some interviews (N=3), the interviewers gave potential responses or told the respondent how they should feel. For example:

Interviewer: What activities would you change?
Participant: What?
Interviewer: Like what activities outside the conflict resolution program would you change?
Participant: Uhhh
Interviewer: Like a lot of people said "watching the boring movies" and
Participant: Yeah, like watching the boring movies.

Some interviewers completed the informants' sentences.

Interviewer: How would you describe this program to someone?
Participant: Fun, interesting, and you get a lot out of it.
Interviewer: So, the whole program was fun?
Participant: The only thing that was boring was when we read off the paper and

Interviewer: The lectures.
Participant: Yeah

The impatient interviewer: In two interviews, the interviewers became impatient, if not

annoyed, when the respondent did not answer the question clearly or concisely.

The playful interviewer: In two interviews, the interviewers were playful, and sometimes

abrasive, by giving the informant "a hard time."

Interviewer: What about the conflict resolution program would you change?
Participant: Like how we presented it to the kids. We should have presented in a better way,
like instead of reading off the paper, show video clips.
Interviewer: Why didn't do you it?!?
Participant: Cuz I didn't have a tape.
Interviewer: Well, you could have stood up and helped out and said something!

In this case, the interviewer had some difficulty maintaining a professional role. In this case, the

interviewers' teasing caused the respondent to shut down.

The rushing interviewer: In two interviews, the interviewers seemed to breeze through the

interview protocol and did not elaborate on the answers. In some cases, the interviewers skipped

questions.

The exhausted interviewer: In five cases, youth interviewers were tired after interviewing 5-10

other youth consecutively, leading to a gradual decline in the quality of the interviews.

Youth Comments about the Impact of the Participatory Evaluation Process

The adolescent co-researchers readily shared their reflections on participating in the

evaluation process, especially when they were asked by their peers, "How do you feel after being

interviewed about the program?" A substantial number of youth (N=54) said they enjoyed being

interviewed, for several reasons. First, youth said, "I feel good. I expressed myself" (n=24). The

informants felt they had time for self-reflection and felt somebody listened to them. One informant

stated, "I feel like I really got some things out that I've been thinking about that's been flowing

through my mind and it's good to let them out." Another shared in her response how she felt after expressing her thoughts: "I feel more open now that I express how I felt and how I thought about working here."

Second, youth felt heard, cared about, and valued by being asked for an interview (n=15), especially since they understood program instructors would use their feedback: "I feel great, I feel that you should know all the thoughts that go through the mentor/intern's mind, so you can change [the program]." Another informant shared, "I feel that they are concerned about what we think and they are caring about us."

The third reason youth enjoyed the interviews was because they felt comfortable and connected after being interviewed (n=5). One informant stated, "I feel comfortable. You're like a easy person to talk to." Another informant shared, "I feel that it is good being interviewed by somebody you know. You feel comfortable to say whatever you want to say."

Finally, youth recognized the value of the program evaluation and felt empowered by the youth-led focus (n=9). Some felt trusted by the adults and thought it was a good idea. One informant was surprised by the process that occurred: "it is really funny. Because I would never expect a peer that I've been working with to be interviewing me." Another informant shared the feeling that the interviews were necessary: "I feel that this was necessary to see what people felt they learned from the apprenticeship job."

Youth Opinions about Advantages and Disadvantages of Youth Interviewers

We asked 116 of the youth about the difference between being interviewed by an adult and a peer. The great majority (N=82 or 70.6%) thought results would have been different with adult interviewers, for five key reasons. Most often, informants said they would have been "nervous," uptight, shy or scared with an adult (n=22),: "It [the interview] would be different because you

would have been stressing, you would have been nervous" and "It'll be more tense…you'll be a little more nervous."

Many informants said they were more comfortable with peers (n=20). These knew their peers better, and liked the feeling of independence when a peer interviews them. One informant said, "I am not used to talking to adults about stuff like this." Others answered in a more positive way, sharing that being interviewed by a peer "makes the stress go away because you know these people, they are your ages so really don't have problems answering the questions quickly." This comfort level was deepened when the teen felt that her interviewer could relate to her. Another student responded to the interviewer by stating, "It's like you can get more where I'm coming from."

The youth could have been cautious about complaining about the program because they might have feared losing their positions in the program (although instructors never punished participants for giving honest feedback). Having a peer interviewer increased the potential for honest responses. One teen said, "I wouldn't be keeping it real with them [adults]" (n=15). Youth said they would not be as honest with an adult, would not share everything they would want to, and they would possibly act "more educated" instead of "like ourselves." One informant said, "I wouldn't answer the questions straight [if interviewed by an adult]."

Some youth said an adult might conduct the interview differently than would peers. These youth thought the conversation with an adult would include more questions and also demand more answers and explanations, or they might "feel pressured by the adult" (n=15). One informant explained that adults might ask more questions because "they may not understand, because I'm a new generation of human being." Some teens felt that the adult interviewer would pressure them into answering a certain way or direct them in what to say. The teens did not feel the interviewer

would have allowed them to "answer the way they had" with their peer, because it would not meet the adult's expectations. Two teens said they would not have done the interview at all if it had been conducted by an adult (n=2), but did not say why.

The youth in our focus group agreed with the use of peer interviewers for many of the reasons above; however, they did forewarn of the potential negative influences of the peer interviewer. One teen said, "Some people wouldn't want to say certain things cause it's their friend. If they liked it and if the friend didn't, they might not be open about it." Another teen said, "If you're asked what needs to be improved and you think cooperation among the teens, what if your friend [doing the interview] is part of the problem?"

While the majority of youth clearly stated they preferred having a peer interviewer, a smaller but substantial subset of informants (n=34 or 16.7%) said there would be no difference between being interviewed by an adult or a peer. Some youth believed that they had the same thing to say to whoever asked the questions: "It wouldn't be different to me cause they were my answers," and "my answers would never change if it were the instructors, the president or anybody else." Some youth approached the interview process in a matter of fact manner and stated, "I mean it ain't no different than an adult. It's just asking and answering questions." The teens who felt comfortable with adult interviewers also tended to be youth who had taken a leadership role in the group, and/or had been in the program for over two sessions. When asked about this response, a youth in the focus group also said, "Maybe they felt like the adult would be able to change the program, so they would feel comfortable just going straight to the adult."

Recommendations and Conclusions

Youth participatory evaluation is a burgeoning field that is practical, cost-effective, and beneficial to youth and program coordinators. Fetterman (2003) poses the following questions about the future of this field:

- Will it demonstrate sufficiently how evaluation can contribute to democratic dialogue?

- Will it shift our attention from the process-use question of how to engage youth in knowledge production to the development of democratic citizens' question of how to produce environments that support ongoing growth and change?

- Will it bring humanity back into evaluation practice? (p. 91)

Our study allows us to answer these questions in the affirmative. Moreover, the youth-led program evaluation had other advantages (affirming and building on the findings of Horsch et al., 2002). It created democracy within the program, optimized youth engagement, met youths' needs for autonomy, allowed youths' voices to be heard, and provided a way to add fun to the typically dull process of evaluation. Youth-led qualitative interviews had distinctive advantages: The youth-led qualitative interviews were clearly superior to standardized scales, adult-led interviews, and written questionnaires for meeting standards of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

In future evaluations, it would be necessary to help youth avoid asking leading questions (i.e. distinguishing between clarifying questions and being leading) and being too playful (i.e. they needed help building rapport versus becoming a distraction to the informant). Youth also needed help experiencing their authority in positive ways, such as dealing with peer informants who were not taking the evaluation seriously, and learning how to help informants elaborate and be more specific (asking follow-up questions). Role-plays of the interview process with informants using different styles can prepare youth and allow them to utilize techniques that will elicit the most

authentic information. Interviewing could be taxing, so it is best not to ask interviewees to conduct more than three interviews in one session.

Youth need to have a firm understanding of the evaluation process—both purpose and procedure. Youth responded with more reflectiveness to being engaged in discussion about the following topics: "What is evaluation?"; "Why is it important?"; "How can it best be used in this program?"; "How can we make it meaningful and fun?" When the youth together constructed their meaning of "program evaluation," rather than having it imposed by a lecture or a strict set of demands, they became more connected with the mission of evaluation, and more enthusiastic researchers.

It is optimal to involve youth in different evaluative tasks depending on their individual strengths. Programs can vary the evaluation process so that individuals who enjoy writing can use a journal format as a way to draw out nervous and overly reticent informants. Interviewers can also be chosen based on characteristics such as their level of patience, articulateness, comfort with a position of relative authority, and conversational skills.

In short, based on these findings, an effective training for interviewers would:

- Discuss with youth the process and meaning of evaluation,

- Help youth choose roles that build on their strengths as informants and interviewers,

- Help them "feel special" for doing this job,

- Ensure they realize the importance of building rapport and helping respondents know that they are really interested in hearing his/her responses,

- Prepare them for the types of scenarios they may encounter,

- Teach them how to ask follow-up questions;

- Develop interviewer sensitivity to informant learning disabilities and, in those instances,

  consider having an adult facilitate the interview.

  In conclusion, a paradigm shift is being seen in the program evaluation literature as

participatory evaluation is becoming "mainstream" (Sabo, 2003, p. 1) and youth participatory

evaluation is recognized as a "field in the making" (Fetterman, 2003, p. 88). London, Zimmerman,

and Erbstein (2003) emphasize that youth participatory research, if used properly, can be crucial in

our understanding of best youth program practices. Our results suggest most youth can be both

researchers/interviewers and informants. Understanding the youths' perspectives, in the youths'

voices and via methods the youth value, has much to offer to program evaluation, including the

potential of making knowledge about youth programs more authentic, and helping services be more

meaningful for youth and the providers who care for them.

Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. How would you describe this program to someone?
2. Why did you decide to join this program?
3. Why did you decide to keep coming to it?

4. Talk some about your favorite part of the program.
5. Talk some about a part of the program you did not enjoy.
6. We would like feedback on the mentoring program
    a. What did you like about your experience being a mentor?
    b. What did you not like about being a mentor?
    c. Give an example of a younger child that you feel you helped.
    d. Give an example of a younger child you had some difficulty with.
    e. What did you learn from the instructors about being a mentor.
    f. What do you think the instructors need to add to the training to make you a better
       mentor.
7. Do you feel you learned from this program?
    - If yes, what?
    - If no, why do you think you didn't learn anything?
8. How has the program or stuff you learned affected you outside of the program?
9. This program was an apprenticeship in social work. What did you learn about being a social
   worker?
10. Is being a social worker something you would consider doing in the future? Why/Why Not?
11. What are the qualities of someone that is a good social worker?

12. Give feedback to the instructors: Tell them how they are doing a good job and what they need to work on (mention them each by name).
13. Talk some about how you worked with the other apprentices in the program.
    a.   Were there ever any problems?
    b.   How did problems get resolved?
14. What skills did you contribute to this program?
15. What can be done differently to make sure all the apprentices stay in the program?
16. One of the objects of this program is not only help the apprentices get ready for a job in the future, but also to help the community. Has this program helped with any of the problems in the community?
    a.   If "YES," how do you feel you've helped?
    b.   If "NO," why do you think it didn't help?
17. Can you give some suggestions on how to make our program safer?
18. Finally, it is the goal of the program to make sure the youth have a voice in how the program is run, so we are using this program evaluation.
    a.   How do you feel after answering these questions about the program?
    b.   How do you feel being interviewed about this program by one of your peers?
    c.   How do you think it would be different if you were being interviewed by an adult?
    d.   Have you seen the instructors make changes to the program when teens bring up concerns?
    e.   [For youth interviewers] – How was your experience interviewing your peers about the program?   Were there any difficulties?
19.

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