

*Youth-Led Research and Evaluation:
Tools for Youth, Organizational, And Community Development*

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Headnote: This article provides case studies and discussion about the ways that youth-led research and evaluation can help link youth and community development goals and outcomes.

Introduction: Exploring the Nexus of Youth and Community Development

It is a deceptively simple formula: “*youth contributing to communities <-> communities supporting youth*” (Tolman and Pittman 2001). The mutual and inter-generational interdependence is appealing: so why is this vision a dream largely deferred, if not outright denied, in most communities? What are the pressures that keep them separate? Why has the realization that youth and community development are inextricably linked – that youth are essential partners in

community building, and that community building can provide developmental opportunities for youth – not been enough to make linking the two common practice? We contend that what is needed to move this realization into reality are concrete models of practice in which youth play leadership roles in addressing community issues, and communities learn to align themselves to better support their youth. Additionally, these models must include analyses of power dynamics that typically marginalize young people from decision-making processes and explicit strategies to help young people access power and to prepare adults to share power with youth. Furthermore, there is a largely unmet need for evaluation approaches that can address the inter-connections between youth and community development.

Some excellent models of practice do exist (as profiled by the Urban Strategies Council (1999) and McLaughlin (2000) among others. The authors now seek to contribute an approach developed by Youth In Focus, a non-profit intermediary organization dedicated to youth empowerment through youth-led research, evaluation and planning. Youth-led Research, Evaluation, and Planning (Youth REP) is a unique and powerful resource for those seeking to link community and youth development (Zimmerman and London, forthcoming, Youth In Focus 2002). In particular, Youth REP is a means for promoting positive youth development and youth empowerment and for generating powerful learning for program, organizational, and community improvement. Youth REP projects are based on an evaluation training methodology that offers youth meaningful leadership opportunities and addresses critical issues of power and social inequity. Youth In Focus offers this methodology as one way to address the profound challenges of linking youth and community development described in the opening paragraph.

This article begins by suggesting some implications of not linking youth and community development for those seeking to achieve these ends, and for those concerned with enhancing the concepts and practices of evaluation. We follow this introduction with a brief description of Youth In Focus's Youth REP methodology for training and supporting youth to play leadership roles in

research and evaluation projects and for training adults and communities to share decision-making power with youth and some case studies of successful Youth REP projects. We examine each case for its lessons on the linkages between youth and community development, and how youth-led evaluation can provide benefits for both processes.

On the fields of war, to divide is often to conquer. So too, in the fields of youth and community development. When youth and community development are conceived of and practiced in isolation (or even in opposition) neither cause is fully achievable and the status quo reigns. Popular images of youth as “super-predators” terrorizing communities are the flip side of traditional models of social service and education train that “rescue” youth from dysfunctional environments – communities that terrorize youth. In contrast, the goals of authentic youth and community development are to heal this divide – to empower community members of all ages and background to create a healthy, sustainable, just society and environment.

When isolated from community (and organizational) development, youth development efforts are stunted their ability to cultivate young people’s individual growth, their membership in communities, and their ability to impact institutional and community change. Youth are “developed” through set of controlled activities rather than as active participants in real world experiences and projects. At best, this objectifying model deprives youth of valuable learning opportunities and relationships; at worst it leads to young peoples’ alienation and resentment of the implied low expectations and the cultural and political disconnect from their communities. This model assumes that youth can be “developed” separate from their communities and in organizations devoid of community members. It fails to acknowledge that organizational and community development activities – researching issues and needs, planning initiatives, organizing projects and campaigns, securing resources, facilitating groups, and evaluating success – are often powerful development opportunities for youth (and all community members). It also fails to address the context in which most young people live – a context in which they must respond to multiple forms

of institutional oppression and develop new skills and models that promote their communities' survival and well-being (Ginwright and Cammarota, forthcoming). As a result, young people are denied their right to learn how to be critical and constructive stewards of their community and agents of community change.

Separated from youth involvement, community development initiatives also suffer. In the absence of youth leadership, programs, organizations, and communities fail to reflect young people's needs and aspirations and development processes lose young people's energy and knowledge. Young people's needs are often indicators of the most critical issues facing the community at large. Additionally, without authentic interaction between adults and youth, negative media stereotypes of young people dominate and alienate community relationships (Franklin and Bales 2000.) Not only does this model fail young people, it fragments the whole community and saps the vitality required for successful development that meets the long-term interests of community members. By not integrating youth at all levels, development processes can actually jeopardize the life and future of the community itself.

In contrast, when thought of and practiced together, youth, organizational and community development can exponentially improve all community efforts. In fact, these processes can fruitfully be conceived of as three streams within a broader current of social change. Connecting youth, organizational and community development can produce generative and self-sustaining processes that serve to address key social issues and revitalize communities and the organizations and individuals within them. In partnership, these modes of development can create ladders of responsibility and support that draw youth into progressively higher levels of organizational and community leadership, laying the foundation for indigenous community leadership. This model is similar to many other innovative models of education (e.g., experiential education, popular education, service learning) and community organizing, which integrate youth into community

building, problem solving, activism, and stewardship over time. This synthesis can also build common cause between groups typically divided (by race, class, gender, sexual orientation), between organizations, between places, and between disciplinary fields.

Recent research on the nexus between youth and community development (Armistead and Wexler 1997), as well as assessments of promising practices, such as Cutler and Edwards (2001) on the Ford Foundation's Community Youth Development Initiative, Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2001) on the Ford and Kellogg Foundation's Lifting New Voices, and Urban Strategies Council (1999) on the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections Initiative, have highlighted a set of principles for linking youth and community development. For example, Cutler and Edwards (2001:22) note that, "*Communities that are actively engaged in dialogue with youth are more likely to obtain positive responses from youth*" Similarly, they note that efforts to transform adult perceptions of youth from problems to resources and allies are critical. The Urban Strategies Council (1999:39) recommends support of organizations that "*bind youth and community*" including those that provide youth development opportunities that address community concerns. The Forum for Youth Investment (2001) observed that successful community-youth development efforts tend to (1) foster youth awareness and responsibility towards their communities, (2) increase youth leadership capacity, and (3) create opportunities for social action. Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2001) challenge youth development to rise to the challenge of community and social justice, "*Through authentic youth participation, youth development can be a vehicle for social justice – but its capacity requires a shift from business as usual in thinking and practice. Youth development methods must view young people as competent citizens with rights – to participate, to express themselves, and to engage in efforts to create socially just communities.*" Ginwright and Cammarota (forthcoming) take this a step further and argue that without a social and community justice lens, youth development efforts systematically fail youth of color and low income youth.

While the conceptual basis for linking community and youth development is well-accepted in research circles, putting this into practice is a missing component of the field. Irby, Ferber and Pittman (2001: 39) note that, “[O]ppportunity exists to build on the growing interest in youth among community development organizations....As yet, it is unclear how easily this interest in youth can be translated into a commitment to youth action, but cautious optimism and careful investment is warranted.”

We argue that Youth In Focus’s approach to participatory evaluation is a practical method to catalyze interest into action, and is therefore worthy of this “*careful investment.*” In particular, our work promises to provide what Irby et al. (2001:40) call on “*funders and advocates*” to do, namely, “*continue to support applied research and documentation that both strengthens the evidence base that youth action makes a difference while expanding best practice knowledge on effective strategies.*” Furthermore, Youth REP goes beyond this call by engaging youth in the documentation, research and action processes themselves, and ultimately in the process of knowledge-production that shapes these fields. Youth-led evaluation requires the participation of multiple parties (youth, organizational staff, and community members), draws on their perspectives and expertise, creates opportunities for new partnerships, and ideally, provides a range of development benefits. The linkages between youth and community development affirmed and enhanced through youth-led evaluation are summarized in Table 1.

Community Youth Development Principle Youth REP Supports and Opportunities Open community dialogue with youth Proactive forums for youth-adult dialogue based on youth-produced research/ evaluation/planning of community issues. Perception of youth as resources and allies by adults Youth offer data-backed analysis and recommendations and energy to help the broader community address common challenges. Youth development opportunities rooted in community Exploring community issues is the context and the content of the projects. Youth research the underlying issues of their specific project topics. Opportunities for social action. Youth

engage in community building through the “entry point” of research/ evaluation/planning. As action research, Youth REP is conducted to inform community action and change processes. Increase youth leadership capacity Youth develop critical thinking, communication and analysis skills, as well as planning, organizing, collaboration, conflict resolution, and team-work capacities. Table 1: Youth REP’s contributions to Community Youth Development

In sum, we argue that youth-led research and evaluation offers the conceptual and practical means to make good on the promise inferred in the hyphen in community-youth development. But what does this look like in real terms, and how can one practice provide benefits to these multiple levels?

Connecting the Dots: The Benefits of Youth REP for Youth, Organizations and Communities

Youth REP, as supported by Youth In Focus, involves training and coaching on multiple levels: youth participants, on-site project facilitators, and executive leadership. The Youth REP process also includes planning for the implementation of the youth-produced recommendations, and exploration of community-engagement strategies to best put the youth “voice” into the community ear and ultimately into action. YIF works to build the capacity of youth, youth serving organizations, and communities to conduct, support and sustain youth-led evaluation as an on-going process of critical inquiry and improvement. Working on all of these levels is critical from a community development and social justice standpoint. Too often, youth development focuses exclusively on building the capacity of young people to participate in adult-led settings. By also investing in the development of organizations, communities, and adult allies, Youth REP helps to shift the power imbalances that marginalize youth in decision making arenas. Thus, the process provides benefits at the three scales of the individual youth participant, the organization, and the broader community. These benefits are summarized in Table 2.

Benefits of Youth-led Evaluation Youth Participants

Organizations/Communities *Skill/ Knowledge Building*

Develop strong research, analytical and writing skills applicable to academic performance and advancement and community organizing

Gain employment experience, job-readiness skills, and valuable networks of professional contacts.

Learn about institutional context, community history.

Learn the process and tools of knowledge production and community change.

Develop staff and institutional capacity to support youth-led evaluation and planning within their organizations.

Improve program, campaign, and service effectiveness and organizational culture through incorporating youth perspectives and analysis of their organizations.

Develop a new understanding of community issues and increase the relevancy of organizational activities.

Gain understanding of local challenges and assess strategies to creatively address youth and broader community needs.

Increase capacity to support intergenerational partnerships and youth leadership.

Leadership Development Obtain civic leadership experience, transferable to a variety of community settings.

Hone public communication, outreach, organizing, and advocacy abilities.

Gain opportunities for youth to mentor other youth evaluators.

Create a ladder of leadership development to draw a pool of new and future staff and leaders trained in program evaluation and planning, and knowledgeable about CBO operations and community organizing strategies.

Benefit from youth serving as organization problem-solvers, developers, and visionaries. Build social capital through a new generation with civic responsibility, analytical skills, organizing skills and empowerment to address the challenges of the community.

Develop new models for engaging all members in decision-making and leadership.*Relationship*

*Development*Build mutually caring and respectful relationships with peers and adult facilitators.

Enhanced mentoring relationships with professional researchers and evaluators, and community leaders.

Enhance partnerships between CBOs and youth participants.

Engage youth that might otherwise remain on the margins or the outside of the organization.

Strengthen relationships with and engage a broad range of community members.

Improve intergenerational communication, respect and collaboration.

Identity-Formation

Empower themselves by serving as evaluators,planners and organizers, instead of passive recipients of services.

Enhance critical consciousness of social factors shaping their lives and how they can address them.

Achieve a sense of pride and empowerment from experiencing their ideas translated into action.Develop an organizational culture of reflective inquiry and adaptive learning.

Enhance the youth-centered and /or intergenerational character of the organization.

Build an organizational culture that is respectful and celebratory of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation difference and pro-active in dealing with related issuesPromote a pro-active and creative approach to community-building.

Build community culture that is respectful and celebratory of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation difference and pro-active about dealing with related issues.

Table 2: Youth REP Benefits for Youth, Organizations and Communities

Youth-REP as a Benefit to Evaluation Practices

Participatory action research is based on the epistemological and political value of local knowledge. That is, PAR holds that inquiry that minimizes, or better, removes the distance between subject and object is both a more reliable representation of reality, and supports the empowerment and self-determination of its participants (Hall 1992, Foote-Whyte 1992). A similar position is proposed by those pointing to the practical and empowerment benefits self-evaluation (Fetterman 2001; Wallerstein 1999, 2000). The argument here is that what one loses in “objectivity” – the presumed value of an outside, dispassionate, and therefore *distant* observer – one gains many-fold in reliability of the data generated by the those *closer* to the topic at hand (Williams 1996). In the case of researching or evaluating youth programs or issues that impact youth, it follows that those with the greatest local knowledge about youth are youth themselves (Wallerstein 1988, Matysik 2000, Shaw 1996.) Like many disenfranchised groups, young people often suffer from misinformed decisions and policies that are made without their input. Youth-led evaluation empowers young people by providing them with the tools to develop and validate knowledge and to direct the development of the programs and policies designed to serve their needs. Thus, whether used as a sole method, or as a complement to adult-led evaluation, it is a reasonable proposition that youth-led evaluation should form an important part of the evaluation of youth programs and of community interventions on issues that impact youth.

Youth-led evaluation can also be a powerful complement to other models of evaluation and assessment. Youth-led evaluation provides information and perspectives that professional and adult-led planning and evaluation cannot. Youth-led evaluation complements other processes by highlighting those issues and questions most important to young people. Evaluators with whom

Youth In Focus has collaborated (including Harder + Co., JMPT Consulting, and University of California at Berkeley's Center for the Study of Social Change) have consistently been impressed and surprised by the innovation and insight of Youth REP evaluators. Specifically they have observed that youth evaluators contribute the following to broader evaluation processes.

Central evaluation questions focused on local youth experience and youth needs

Youth-friendly data collection instruments

Researcher-subject relationships characterized by trust and respect

Data analysis and interpretation informed by experts in local youth culture

Findings and recommendations that focus organizational and community change on youth experience and youth needs

Creative reporting which speaks to broad youth and community audiences.

A cadre of young people that are educated and committed to go to the next step of action: advocacy and implementation.

These benefits to the evaluation process and product of youth engagement can be seen in a sample of projects facilitated by Youth In Focus.

The San Francisco Juvenile Justice Evaluation Project.

The Juvenile Justice Evaluation was a project of Rising Youth for Social Equity with Coleman Advocates for Children and Youth, Delancy Street Foundation, the Center for the Study of Social Change, and Youth In Focus. YIF helped a team of twenty youth researchers, many of whom had experience in the juvenile justice system, to evaluate the impact of San Francisco's new Juvenile Justice Action Plan – designed to reform the city's juvenile justice system by diverting funds to alternatives to incarceration. Youth evaluators researched the needs of young people in target neighborhoods and developed indicators for measuring the success of the Action Plan's

projects. The team worked alongside adult evaluators, policy makers and advocates. As a result of their work, the team made recommendations that influenced both juvenile justice programs and city policies. The team's findings supported ongoing city-wide youth organizing efforts aimed at transforming the juvenile justice system. In their own words from the introduction to the youth evaluators' report:

One of the goals of this project is to ensure young people are given a voice in designing and evaluating the very programs designed to reach them. Young people will be treated not simply as targets of service but as agents of change. The Youth Evaluation Team aims to ensure that the views of all groups involved in the project are equally represented.

The youth-led character of the project contributed much to the ultimate quality and impact of the evaluation. First, having youth evaluators with personal experience with the juvenile justice system added greatly to the "local knowledge" of the research team and to the team's ability to uncover information from their peers that evaluators without such insider's perspective might either neglect or have more difficulty accessing. Second, policy makers picked up on the youth research team's identification of "respect" (i.e., describing a humanistic and dignified treatment within the system) as an indicator of positive interventions. The fact that the adult evaluation team at first discounted respect as an indicator due to the difficulty of defining it made the youth team's contribution all the more important. In general, both adult and youth participants described the experience as transformative. They experienced new ways of being in intergenerational relationships and new confidence in their ability to impact city-level issues. The team members stayed involved in community leadership positions as mapping experts, program and organization directors, community organizers, and advocates.

The San Francisco Juvenile Justice Evaluation Project illustrates the connections between youth and community development in a range of ways. First, the project promoted a city-wide

dialogue – informed by youth voices -- about youth needs and experiences in the juvenile justice system. Second, it developed deep and lasting relationships between professional researchers, youth leaders, and youth advocacy organizations. These relationships have helped build a new component of social capital that has proven valuable in the on-going organizing efforts to reform the juvenile justice system in a thoughtful and effective fashion. Third, the project’s skill-building and leadership development components helped build youth capacity for on-going civic engagement. Finally, the project reached out to a population of youth that are typically marginalized in policy-making, in this case, low income youth of color – many of whom had prior experiences with or within the juvenile justice system themselves.

Youth IMPACT.

Youth IMPACT is a program of the San Francisco Department of Children Youth and their Families to implement youth-led evaluation of community-based organizations funded by the Department. In 2000-2001, Youth In Focus worked with Youth IMPACT facilitators to train and support a group of 10 high-school aged youth-evaluators to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of 40 CBOs. The youth published their methods, findings, and recommendations in a final report entitled “Youth Voices Inspiring Positive Change” which was distributed to CBOs, departments, foundations, and professional evaluators across the Bay Area. Like the Juvenile Justice evaluation project, Youth IMPACT contributed to the understanding of youth-serving institutions in ways distinct from earlier adult-led processes. The youth team’s selection of the notion of “trust” as a fundamental indicator of a successful youth-serving organization (embodied in their research question: “What makes a CBO trustworthy to youth”) had never been considered by the department. Similarly, their emphasis on the involvement of families and community members in CBOs, and their finding that many CBO’s reach ends at their own walls, provided DCYF with a compelling policy recommendation to increase community involvement by the organizations they

fund. The Youth IMPACT final report itself, *Youth Voices, Inspiring Creative Change*, with its urban and colorful design full of photographs taken by the youth team is striking for its difference from standard evaluation report formats and has become a hot item by area CBOs and foundations.

The voices of some of the youth team members best speak to the power of the project.

“The things I learned will be beneficial in life because they will help me further my skills as a person and as a worker doing evaluations in the future.”

“I like doing the evaluation. It made me more aware and more interested in politics and things that go [on] in the city so it can help me in the future.”

“I believe this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for youth to genuinely improve the programs of San Francisco.”

Youth IMPACT helped promote a synthesis of community and youth development in both the youth-led evaluation project itself, and its applications within the Department of Children, Youth and their Families. First, Youth IMPACT offered a powerful youth development opportunity for the participants in the form of skill building (e.g., public communication, critical thinking, qualitative and quantitative analysis, writing, job readiness); leadership development; and cross-ethnic and neighborhood teamwork and peer relationships. The project provided youth with an inside view on the workings of city government, and an appreciation of the budgeting process, constituency accountability, and the complexity of policy development. From the perspective of the city government, Youth IMPACT set a precedent for meaningful youth involvement in city funding and policy making. Based on her experience with Youth IMPACT, former DCYF Director Alvarez-Rodriguez stated that, *“It is imperative that any organization with a primary mission of serving youth have youth-led evaluation as a cornerstone of their work.”* Youth IMPACT findings will serve as a basis for future funding, program development and technical

assistance activities by DCYF, and, in the words of DCYF's Deborah Alvarez-Rodriguez, as a broader precedent for *"the way the City does business."* Indeed, DCYF now distributes the Youth IMPACT book to bidders for department contracts as an indication of the department's youth development criteria. Youth from Youth IMPACT have also become engaged in the city's on-going needs assessment and allocation process of youth funding.

Serving Our Youth and Communities.

Youth In Focus designed and coached a youth-led needs assessment of youth opportunities and resources in the South of Market (SOMA) neighborhood on behalf of a collaborative of local youth serving organizations called SOYAC (Serving Our Youth and Community). The SOYAC youth team produced a detailed analysis of the needs of SOMA youth and pro-active recommendations in a written report, video called "Realism", and web-site format. The team will use these products to advocate for SOMA youth neighborhood development and investment priorities to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, the Redevelopment Agency, neighborhood networks, and funders. Youth leaders from around the Bay Area and as far away as Harlem and Seattle have viewed the video as an inspiration for their own activities. Many of the youth team's recommendations speak to the connections between youth and community development that their action research project uncovered. For example,

One of the major issues identified during the 1992 assessment was the lack of a large neighborhood park. This need still has not been fulfilled by the City. [Our data show] that out of the 194 youth surveyed, 100 stated that they would like to see a new park...The need for a neighborhood park is essential in the South of Market neighborhood since 53% of the youth stated that their housing lacks a play area.....South of Market youth and families are forced to travel

outside the neighborhood to find a space for outdoor family functions. It is essential that there be a green or open space for the well being of the neighborhood.

Ly Nguyen, Executive Director of Oasis facilitator of the project affirmed the value of Youth REP.

“It can make a huge impact on an entire community. For us, the process impacted SOYAC and our members along with the community. One of the community impacts is that it gives a reason for organizations to lend their resources to a youth-led process. In a sense, it is safe to say that the Youth REP process can be completed not only by an organization but also by a neighborhood network.”

These statements clearly indicate the SOMA needs assessment project’s linking of youth and community development. Like the Juvenile Justice and Youth IMPACT projects, the SOMA project helped build community capacity in the form of upcoming youth leaders. Its topical focus examined community vitality and well-being issues from a youth perspective, and provided a unique data set to city government and community leaders. Through its research and evaluation, the SOYAC Youth Collective was able to give voice to perspectives of young people in a neighborhood that has historically been shaped by outside commercial and civic forces.

The Nexus: Revisited

We opened this chapter with the puzzle of why the mutually supportive relationship between youth and community development is so clear in concept and difficult in practice. We have described the nascent state of efforts to link community and youth development, some of the barriers that prevent integration, and the need for practical models that can integrate these two processes. We have suggested youth-led research and evaluation as one approach to such

integration and summarized the benefits to youth participants, organizations, communities, and to the quality of the research itself. Despite the successes to date in this endeavor experienced by Youth In Focus, a number of questions remain. This chapter concludes with some suggestions of further research, reflection, and action needed to fully realize the promise of youth-led research and evaluation.

First, while it is hard to argue with the point that few models of integrated community and youth development exist, highlighting this is not the same as explaining it. Deeper exploration is needed about the factors that prevent youth development from fully incorporating community-scale theories and practices, and conversely, that prevent community development and community organizing efforts from considering themselves as youth development and youth organizing opportunities. Is the disconnect merely a historical contingency, or is there something intrinsic, cultural, and/or structural to either or both fields that resists linking? The answer to this question has significant implications to the way that youth-led research, evaluation and planning is applied as an institutional change strategy. If the problem is merely a historical circumstance then the task as a relatively easy one. If however, there are more intrinsic obstacles to address, practitioners of Youth REP will need to adopt a much more nuanced and strategic approach. Second, it is one thing to recommend a linkage between youth and community development, it is another to enact it. Youth-led research, evaluation and planning may be one means to do so, but cannot be seen as an exclusive strategy. What other methods and approaches can build the capacity of youth and community development institutions to make this potential linkage real? Third, this chapter has confined its view to the positive convergence between Youth REP and the fields of youth and community development as well as the practices of evaluation. However, there are likely to be circumstances in which this is not the case and conflicts between these values may surface. What are these circumstances, and how might they be addressed? What are the circumstances and conditions that encourage success? Case studies of more problematic efforts may be instructive

here.

The goal for youth-led research and evaluation in the context of linking youth and community development should be to shift and heal the relationships between youth and adults, to foster the growth of young people and community members as community stewards, and to support the ongoing development of sustainable and just communities.

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