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The Nonprofit Nerd (April 2019)

The Nonprofit Institute at Portland State University

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THE NONPROFIT NERD

Research you can use.

This month's topic is participatory evaluation with youth.

Talking about youth in evaluation would not be appropriate without including youth perspectives. This month, thanks to The Nonprofit Institute's instructor Thuan Duong, we are fortunate to share insights from youth actively involved in a major program evaluation. As part of the evaluation of the DHS Child Welfare's LIFE Program (see program description below), Thuan works with a Youth Advisory Board (YAB), who are collaboratively interviewed below.

Besides working as a [Research Associate with Portland State University's Center for Improvement of Child & Family Services](#), Thuan is an instructor for the [Professional Certificate in Nonprofit Program Evaluation program offered through The Nonprofit Institute](#), and brings a wealth of expertise in culturally-responsive program evaluation to students of this program. We will be releasing an application for the 2019-2020 cohort of this program later this spring. If you are interested in learning more, [please sign up for our interest list](#).

Identifying stakeholders is a critical first step when thinking about any program evaluation. Including these stakeholders in designing, implementing, and reporting is not only more culturally-responsive, it is also empowering, especially to service users. As nonprofit professionals, we are asked to do too much in too little time, and participatory evaluation can seem out of reach. We propose reframing participation as investing time in evaluation that benefits not only your organization, but your community, as well.

Let the resources and insights we share in The Nonprofit Nerd inspire you to get your nerd on and find innovative ways to make research and data work for you and your nonprofit!



To explore participatory evaluation with youth, Thuan Duong and a youth advisory board (YAB) are collaboratively responding to questions from The Nonprofit Nerd editors. When members of the YAB are speaking from their own individual experience we have named the author.

Introduction by Thuan Duong

The Leveraging Intensive Family Engagement (LIFE) program is a child welfare demonstration project based on four foundational values:

- strengths-based
- trauma-informed
- family and youth voice
- cultural responsiveness.

From the beginning, the LIFE evaluation team decided to adopt these same values in our evaluation. As a result, four years ago researchers convened a youth advisory board (YAB), made up of youth with experience in foster care, to guide all research related to youth. The LIFE evaluation is approaching its fifth and final year of research.

The impact of the youth advisory board has been immense—to both the evaluation and the practice. The YAB has guided every aspect of the youth evaluation from data collection protocols, interview guides, youth surveys, training youth interviewers, presenting youth data to LIFE providers as part of continuous quality improvement processes, identified new short-term outcomes, and is now working on co-analyzing qualitative and quantitative data.

The YAB currently has six youth members and three evaluators/partners. This nine person team meets monthly. Because of the intensive work related to analyzing data, the YAB members were recently offered the choice of joining the team as paid research assistants rather than voluntary board members.

What is community-based participatory evaluation (CBPE)? What benefits does it provide to evaluators and to communities? What is the relationship between CBPE and working with youth?

Thuan: I am going to say something that's probably a little controversial—I really dislike that term, community-based participatory evaluation. I feel like it's become a label that so many evaluators adopt but one that has become diluted and rendered somewhat meaningless. I believe in the intended value but I almost never use that term to describe work I personally aspire to do. My preference is to describe the work and the actions I take to engage multiple perspectives.

Engaging stakeholders in evaluation is critical. I always encourage folks to go really broad when considering stakeholders—some of us skew towards focusing on families or service users so we need to also consider funders or policymakers. Others of us skew towards focusing on the funders or providers and need reminders to work family and youth voice into our evaluation.

The benefits of engaging a wide range of stakeholders in an evaluation, as early as possible, is that it reinforces the relevance of the project. The last thing I want to do is work on a project that is not relevant, doesn't serve a purpose other than meeting some reporting or funding need. Sometimes a project will come to me that looks like it's only for a funder and the way to make it meaningful is to think about all the people who are impacted by this work and engage them.

Ask stakeholders, "what do you want to know about this program? What do you want other people to know about your work? What do you want people to know about your experience in this program? Who do you want to hear this?"

Youth engagement in evaluation is critical. If you look at the world we live in, youth voice is becoming

increasingly valued but often in only tokenized ways or as consumers (in a capitalistic sense, not a service sense. I recently discovered that a major oil company has a youth advisory board?!). The challenge for youth-engaged evaluation is to think about how to do it in realistic ways, ways that recognize the resource limitations but also to build in resources from the beginning so that we do have authentic and meaningful engagement.

For our work with the Waiver Youth Advisory Board, we originally thought we'd meet with them once per quarter and work with them to guide our research. I kind of laugh about that now because that premise alone, meeting with an advisory board four times per year and expecting them to guide "our" research; you can see where we misunderstood what authentic engagement meant.

Over the last four years the youth board members have taught me how to share power, how to reconceptualize whose research it is, and how this work cannot be accomplished, in any authentic way, in a couple hours every couple months.

Youth voices are often overlooked in program evaluation. Why aren't more youth voices represented in evaluation? Why is engagement with youth in evaluation valuable?

Anthony, YAB Advisor: Adults are taught that because of their lived experience and age that they know things that youth do not. To be fair to adults there is some truth to this because they know the world through their experiences and have developed some ideas about what they have to do to make it in the world. This perspective is not helpful to youth because the youth they work with, or encounter ... (even their own biological children) are not [youth in foster care] and they do not have our lived experience or perspective of the world. It is unfair to expect youth to live up to the adult version of what the world is or saddle them with their obstacles.

This is why having youth involved with evaluation is key. Understanding the impact on youth who are living with these policies. Youth do not have the necessary resources to not be affected by these policies so including them in evaluations allows us to create a more equitable world and life for youth.

Youth are the most vulnerable population in the world and to ignore the impact we have on them is wrong. We need to understand their perspective of the world and their environments if we are going to have programs and different entities that are truly inclusive of youth and their voices.

That is why I think that youth voice in evaluation is needed and should always be included.

I think the two biggest lessons I have learned, and would want other people to take from this all is reframing one's own perspective. We tend to feel sorry for or treat youth that have been in the foster care system as fragile. I think this is a self serving thought process and doesn't help the youth. We need to give the voice back to the youth. We need to empower them and walk along with them in this journey.

One of the biggest things we heard time and time again was that the youth don't feel like they are being listened to. I have experienced this personally. When you're not listened to, you don't feel empowered, you feel hopeless. Second thing that came up was that youth don't feel informed. When you're being moved or being told what to do but there is no communication, I always felt like I was just a thing people wanted to get rid of.

Talk about the Youth Advisory Board. Why was it founded? What is its purpose? What motivates you to participate in it? What do you get out of it?

Nicole, YAB Advisor: The purpose of the youth board, from my perspective is to help create a youth-centered practice. The board brings together research, hard work, and both knowledge in our field as well as lived experience. That's vital because all angles can be addressed and ultimately the youth is at the center of our focus.

I am personally motivated to participate because I am lucky enough to have finally found my voice. I feel like I can help give a voice to youth, that's really important for me. Secondly, I think it's important to give back to the community, for better or for worse, I went through the system. I believe it's my duty to help youth that are in the same situation as I was. Maybe we can get it right this time around.

How does the Advisory Board work? Is there a leader? What is your process for providing feedback or sharing in the group? How is this feedback incorporated into the evaluation process?

Maddy, YAB Advisor: Once a month we meet as a whole group. Each month we also choose a different facilitator. The facilitator isn't necessarily the leader, but more of someone to keep us all on task. The facilitator and one of the researchers on our board make an agenda for the next meeting so we have a good outline of what we're doing. As we go through this agenda it's pretty easy to follow and speak on the topics you're able to. We all take each other's contributions very seriously and like to build off of each other's ideas, [and] everyone's feedback feels important which is the great part.

The youth feedback is the evaluation process, it's not an add-on to the evaluation process.

When we developed the board we made a decision to center youth voices. Our understanding today of what that means is much different than it was four years ago. As a team we sometimes disagree on our direction, but whatever decisions that come out of the meetings, those guide the research.

The Advisory Board is a professional setting. We all work hard to contribute to the work in the most meaningful ways. There is no hierarchy system, as each member is very driven, we kind of work as a team. I feel as though all of the members bring their own perspectives, knowledge and experiences to the table. This allows us to address the evaluation on multiple levels. All the work we put in is in hopes of helping youth in foster care.

What are 1-2 important lessons that you can share with evaluators about CBPE or conducting evaluations with youth, that you've learned from working with the Advisory Board?

Thuan: The most important lesson I want to share is that 1) youth voice is critical in research and evaluation and 2) be attentive to the process; we want to make sure that we're challenging oppressive structures and patterns, rather than recreating them.

[In] systems such as academia or public service, we are going to feel pressured to fast track this process because we need to meet our deadlines and deliverables. Recognize that this ... challenge[s] authentic inclusion and only serves to reinforce the message that youth voice is only relevant when they agree with adults and/or other authorities and/or work within adult timelines.

And finally 3) recognize that authentic partnership is going to require resources including time, money, and critical reflection. We cannot put transcripts in front of the YAB and say, "analyze this." We have to make sure we provide the tools and training necessary so that youth understand how to analyze qualitative data.

And we have to make sure that those tools don't just set up a path where youth would analyze data through an adult lens, but will create space where their unique lens will open up new codes or new findings. This is the challenge, but this is also the reward of including youth voice.

Know someone you'd like to see featured in the Nonprofit Nerd? [Tell us who and why!](#)



RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

As Thuan and the Youth Advisory Board (YAB) mentions in their interview, youth movements are gaining momentum, such as the [Sunrise Movement's climate change organizing](#), and other recent youth-led student protests. Often there is skepticism surrounding the partnerships associated with youth-adult work, and as we learned from Thuan and the YAB, there is a great deal to learn venturing into these relationships. [Advocates for](#)

[Youth offers a fact sheet on youth-adult partnerships](#) that breaks down the elements of a more authentic and collective multi-generational group.

Generally, there are ethical considerations, such as obtaining informed consent and protecting privacy, inherent to conducting any research with youth. [Pew Research Center](#) offers helpful information that uncovers and provides strategies for navigating these ethical considerations.

Evaluators across industries are working to incorporate all stakeholders meaningfully and consistently throughout the evaluation process. Some call this community-based participatory evaluation (CBPE), which is related to community-based participatory research (CBPR). Beyond the YAB, some examples of using participatory research suggest that intentionally including youth in research or evaluation is [empowering to the participants](#) and [enriching to the programs](#).

Additionally, there are opportunities to educate youth on participatory research that can benefit the entire community, as seen in [this presentation on teaching CBPR to youth in STEM education](#). What's exciting about proliferating participatory research methods to youth is the prospect of deconstructing some of the cost and time constraints often associated with CBPE. Additionally, utilizing participatory methods may constitute an intervention in itself, as seen in [this research on bullying prevention with youth](#).

As we have seen in the past three newsletters, participatory methods open doors to collecting stories of historically marginalized, silenced or ignored communities. How could your program benefit from conducting participatory evaluation? What barriers do you foresee in implementing a participatory evaluation? If you have thoughts or questions on this topic, we would love to hear your perspective as well.



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