

Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People, by Kim Sabo Flores. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008.

Reviewed by Anne Cullen
Western Michigan University

Participatory evaluation approaches, by their very nature, are designed to actively involve and engage stakeholders in the evaluation process. However, there has been a surprising lack of youth involvement in participatory evaluations to date. There are a number of reasons why participatory evaluations might not include youth: participatory approaches tend to use program staff rather than clients, youth might be viewed as not sufficiently emotionally or socially developed, and youth might be viewed as not possessing the skills necessary to conduct evaluations. In *Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People*, Sabo Flores presents a cogent argument for engaging youth in evaluation processes. She also presents numerous promising strategies that can be utilized to engage youth in the evaluation process.

The first part of the book, “Foundations of Youth Participatory Evaluation,” consists of two chapters that provide an overview of youth participatory evaluation (YPE), including its basic definition, history, principles, and benefits. In the first chapter, Sabo Flores discusses the benefits of YPE to youth, adults, society, and the evaluation field. Most of the benefits mentioned are related to empowerment or betterment of individuals and programs. Youth gain more self-confidence, competencies, and an expanded social capital. Programs benefit

because the perspectives of youth are included and can be used to improve programming. The second chapter discusses how performance and play can be used to engage youth in evaluations. Sabo Flores argues that creative thought processes such as movement, sound, poetry, song, and “nonsense” can be used to approach complex evaluation concepts. Methods and concepts that are typically understood and undertaken by evaluation experts are presented in formats so that youth can easily assimilate and relate to the material.

The second part of the book is essentially a step-by-step guide for conducting youth participatory projects. Sabo Flores begins by addressing major considerations for undertaking such a project, such as how many youth should be included, should youth be compensated for their involvement, and who should facilitate the YPE? Much of the content deals with how to design the evaluation, train youth participants in evaluation methods such as conducting focus groups and developing surveys, and conduct data analysis and reporting.

Interwoven throughout this section are creative strategies to engage youth in the evaluation process. For example, to gain insight into youths’ perspectives on how their program works, Sabo Flores suggests the use of a storyboard. Youth are asked to create a story that documents a youth before, during, and after program participation. The storyboard

process creates a natural segue into developing a program logic model. The approach to data reporting is another example of how Sabo Flores weaves play into the YPE process. To avoid the typical boredom or disinterest in report writing, youth can present evaluation findings in the form of a game show. Youth are thus able to use an entertaining format to convey meaningful information to other stakeholders.

The clear strength of *Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People* is Sabo Flores' convincing argument that youth need to be included as active stakeholders in participatory evaluations. Consider the following quote from Patton:

One of the negative connotations often associated with evaluation is that it is something done *to* people. Participatory evaluation, in contrast, involves working *with* people. Instead of being research subjects, the people in the research setting become "co-investigator." The process is facilitated by the researcher, but is controlled by people in the program or community. They undertake a formal, reflective process for their own development and empowerment (2002, p. 183).

By not including youth in the evaluation process, evaluation becomes something that is done *to* youth as opposed to something that is done *with* them and, therefore, cannot be considered truly participatory. Sabo Flores does more than just argue that youth need to be included, she also provides extensive strategies and tips for how youth can be engaged.

Throughout the book, Sabo Flores presents many compelling arguments for the use of YPE. However, the book lacks a critical examination of potential obstacles to its use. Those interested in undertaking youth participatory evaluation need to be aware of both limitations and constraints to using this approach. The book would have been greatly enhanced if Sabo Flores had shared past difficulties encountered when using YPE. Readers need to know if there are additional cost issues inherent to YPE.

Several of the strategies suggested in the book require time investments; do these strategies translate to higher financial investments as well? Another question that emerges when reading this book is how difficult is it to get stakeholders to agree to use YPE? Given the fact that youth have been largely excluded from participatory approaches, how difficult is it to convince stakeholders to include youth in the evaluation process?

Another interesting omission in the book is a description of what ages are meant by the term "youth." Although she states that YPE can be done with youth of the same or varying ages, she does not provide guidance on age limits or minimum requirements. Does this mean that all of the strategies presented are applicable to all ages? It would be helpful if a chart would be provided that listed what strategies are appropriate for each age group.

Despite the issues mentioned above, *Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People* serves as a good resource for practitioners looking to engage youth in both evaluation and research. The strategies put forth in this book can easily be adapted to a variety of different projects. Moreover, the book is clear, easy to read, and engaging. I have little doubt that I will refer to this book in the future if the opportunity to work with youth arises. I would recommend this book to any evaluator or researcher looking for strategies to engage youth.

References

- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.