

**Poster Type: Innovative Idea**

**Reevaluting Agricultural Youth Program Evaluation**

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### **Introduction/Need for innovation**

Globalization and modernization of agriculture challenge youth in agricultural programs with significant changes and shifts in social norms (White, 2012). The United States Department of Agriculture is predicting an increase in agriculture positions that cannot be met with the current level of post-secondary graduates prepared in agriculture. With this demand, it is essential that researchers have an accurate and full picture of the challenges faced by agricultural youth. Further, agricultural professionals must understand perceptions of youth, regarding agricultural employment opportunities, to offer learning and educational experiences, which fully prepare youth for future agricultural careers. These changes challenge evaluation professionals to redefine parameters for evaluating the evaluation of agricultural programs for youth. This concepts adds to the National Research Agenda of the American Association for Agricultural Education Priority Area 5 – Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs by providing further insight into evaluation results of agricultural youth programs (Doerfert, 2011).

Within Western culture, youth are often treated as problems or victims that require prevention services rather than capable empowered citizens (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). This is a direct result of a pervasive culture of adultism, which emphasizes the discrimination of youth and oppression of their competences. This perception is no different in evaluation, which often leads the findings to stray from meaningful and ethical results. However, at the core of evaluation is the need to produce public discourse that is valuable to the betterment of society (Collins, Kirkhart, & Brown, 2014). Evaluators must reconsider youth as a marginalized group to better understand the communities in which they work. Therefore, a participatory approach should be practiced by evaluators working with youth-based programs to empower youth through positive youth development and account for the predispositions caused by adultism.

Many do not view youth as an oppressed group because adultism, which is driven by power, is generationally engrained in our culture (Teitelbaum, 1981). It is a universal requirement for children to abide by adult authorities under *loco parentis*. The mistreatment of young people is more pervasive than any other age group based on a society of adult-tailored systems (LeFrancois, 2014). In recent years, evaluation professionals have called attention to youth focused evaluation. The American Evaluation Association (2015) views young people as a source of valuable input and assets to the evaluation process. Youth are able to determine the worth of youth-centered initiatives, assist in evaluation designs that are appropriate for peers, and carry out social change driven from evaluation findings.

### **How it Works**

Evaluators need to find ways to engage youth in qualitative research to authenticate data coding and analysis. Although this can take many different forms, including youth participatory action evaluation, this article addresses two innovate methods. The first is to conduct focus groups that allow youth to speak freely about how they would interpret portions of the data. The focus group results would confirm or call for further consideration for the analysis for the findings of elder evaluators. The other process is more in depth and involves creating a program that gives youth an opportunity to engage with mentors to learn techniques and evaluation skills. The latter training should incorporate both technical and ethical aspects that give youth the opportunity to build trust, think critically, and be responsive.

Evaluators achieve this goal by engaging youth in activities that provide adult mentors who are cognizant of adultism and its impacts on the achievements of youth. Training will give young evaluators the credentials needed to be seen as competent. In turn, this participation leads to systematic inquiry. The youth are able to provide vital perspectives on the agricultural programs that serve them or their peers, which in turn enhances all stakeholders' understandings of the youth experiences. Further, youth participation heightens the respect for participants. Respect for participants is essential for honest interactions. Therefore, the youth involvement will improve the credibility of the findings.

### **Implications**

Evaluators should utilize youth for coding and data analysis when using an evaluation design that employs qualitative methods. An adult evaluator's interpretations perpetuate adultism perspectives on youth (Teitelbaum, 1981). Youth participatory action engages youth within the evaluation process, but often leaves youth out of the data analysis phase (Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichty, & Aoun, 2010). This occurs because youth competence raises ethical questions. Therefore, it is imperative that if youth are heavily involved in the evaluation design and implementation process that proper training be involved. Youth evaluators are beneficial for accurate findings and provide positive youth development for the young evaluators. "According to the community-based evaluators, participation in evaluation research has helped in strengthening the critical thinking, research, public speaking, writing, and planning skills of both the youth and adults" (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, p. 29). Further, when the influence of adultism is reduced youth experience positive impacts, such as: an increase in self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth; a decrease in powerlessness; a feeling of being taken seriously; an ability to function well in the world; a decrease in powerlessness, deviant behavior, and self-destructive actions; and an overall feeling of being loved and wanted (Bell, 2003). Positive youth development is impacted by improvements to the quality of life.

### **Future plans/advice to others**

Evaluators should consider differences in perspectives between each participant within their programs. Youth must be mature enough to take on the role and uphold ethical standards. Mentors must be equipped to work with youth in a positive manner that promotes youth empowerment. As evaluators of youth programs, we intend to begin utilizing youth evaluating training programs and focus groups to ensure the credibility of results. Our plan is to begin by training a few youth to help with preliminary studies. Case studies will be conducted on the youth utilized in these programs to receive the perspectives of youth evaluators within the process. By doing this, the empowerment granted through youth-participatory evaluations will harness the powerlessness and allow youth to explore who they truly are. With these opportunities, personal and social change can be brought about to foster activism.

### **Costs/resources needed**

The costs associated depend entirely on the number of youth participating and the extent of the training. Recruitment of participants should also be considered. The costs are kept to a minimum by utilizing partners such as the evaluation educators and graduate students as mentors. The additional cost is time. Time will need to be contributed to training youth and the process of coding and analysis will likely take longer for the evaluator.

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