

Notes from the Field: A Positive Experience With Georgia Youth

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Apprehension is increasing about America's ability to educate its next generations to engage in productive lives at work and in local communities. There is widespread concern about the erosion of quality in education as well as the deterioration in our communities. Both, of course, are inextricably related. A primary function of education is to provide opportunities for young people to develop capabilities which are of value for the welfare of the whole community. But when the unity between education and social life frays, the ability to transfer knowledge and social wealth from one generation to the next is diminished.

Metis Associates, a New York City consulting firm, has been evaluating the Family Resource Center (FRC) for the Chatham-Savannah Youth Futures Authority. Because the FRC is consciously attempting to reconnect education and learning of youth participants with community service goals and in keeping with Metis's participatory evaluation approach, we decided to involve youth who participate in FRC activities in our research process. Our goals were multiple. We wanted to:

- 1) Meaningfully incorporate FRC youth participants into the evaluation and, in so doing, help the youth to develop critical thinking and research skills as part of their experience;
- 2) Introduce them to careers in research; and
- 4) Consciously reinforce their emerging sense of "communitas" or community spirit.
- 5) From a research standpoint, we wanted the questions in the youth survey to reflect ideas, concerns and colloquial language of young people .

The intent of the survey was to learn from students who attended schools within the FRC target area whether FRC activities and programs were in agreement with youths' opinions about their own community, individual and family interests. We believe we met our goals. The results of the FRC youth survey were enriched by the participation of the young people--and, in some small way, we believe that we helped strengthen the link between learning and community service in their minds.

Family Resource Center's youth development professionals, who facilitate youth activities at the center and neighboring schools, worked with Metis to recruit, train and hire 15 young people (eight from Savannah High School and seven from the Uhuru Project at Hubert Middle School) to help us develop the Youth Survey as part of the wider evaluation. We coached the youngsters on how to make presentations to homeroom classes in their schools, and to distribute, collect and tally surveys for students at both schools.

Family Resource Center staff were critical in the recruitment of the participating youth, scheduling of orientation and training sessions, and in coaching youth and providing ongoing support. Our objective was to develop a cadre of neighborhood youth to support ongoing, local evaluation efforts. We attempted to infuse career exploration skills into the training, helping them to see linkages between the survey development and administration activities and transferable, marketable skills in career areas such as city planning, investigative reporting, and other research-oriented fields.

Our approach also includes helping the "youth survey consultants" to review and summarize the survey findings, prepare tables and graphs, and write about findings. These activities expose youth participants to a comprehensive range of evaluation activities, and provide opportunities for integrating academic and vocational skills.

We believe that the use of youth participants as evaluators and data collectors deepens the evaluation approach by incorporating them into the assessment in a respectful and useful way. This methodology can strengthen the Family Resource Center's approach and commitment to youth, and kindle in youth a greater connection with and commitment to their community. It also provides a means for the Family Resource Center team to learn more about the interests and concerns of young people, and in turn, to develop a focused response that incorporates these interests/concerns into their plans. Outside evaluators may be considered to be more objective; but teaching residents -- in this case youngsters -- to clearly define their interests and to develop ways to achieve them truly supports their own ability to create a plan or program to obtain their own objectives.

Metis's incorporation of youth into the evaluation research also enhanced their interpersonal communication capabilities developed through training and use of interviewing skills that can be transferred to other situations. The youth participants in this evaluation also increased their understanding of the importance of research, needs assessment and evaluation, and were introduced to possible career pathways. We anticipate that youth will continue their involvement in participatory evaluation throughout the course of the evaluation, and that they will play a role in assessing neighborhood conditions.

Specifics of Youth Involvement in the Survey Research

Metis negotiated contracts with the youth participants that specified the activities in which they would provide assistance, and the terms of their employment. We provided our youth survey researchers with Metis Associates' business cards that they could use to identify themselves.

Stipends were provided based on the response rate for each class that was surveyed. Middle school participants earned an average of \$55, and high school participants earned an average of \$80. The 15 participants earned a total of \$900 - an amount that was \$400 more than our initial estimate because many youngsters were able to obtain a response rate of 100 percent in classrooms. After reviewing their completed control sheets and verifying their math, we "paid" them with checks drawn on the Fictitious Bank at 999 Wall Street in New York. After we showed them how to endorse the checks, we exchanged their "checks" for cash. Upon successful completion of the Youth Survey activities, Metis provided the youth with letters of reference that could be used to help them secure part-time or summer jobs.

The Youth Survey was designed to obtain information from students about: their awareness of and participation in the Family Resource Center's services and programs; areas of congruence and discordance between youths' assessment of their own and the community's needs for services and activities and those that are currently offered at the FRC; and the extent to which youths see themselves as having a role in community revitalization as envisioned by the Family Resource Center. Overall, this methodological approach enabled the youth data collectors to participate in the assessment of their community needs, understand their schoolmates' opinions, and gain skills in research and evaluation. We view this portion of the evaluation as congruent with the FRC's youth and community development efforts.

Metis staff worked with youth survey researchers to identify strategies they could use to obtain commitments and support from school administrators and staff for the school survey effort. We wanted youth to explain the purpose of the survey to their schoolmates, describe their involvement in its development, and identify strategies they could use to encourage high participation rates. We did not want youth to rely on administrators or staff to distribute or collect the surveys, which would be the "easy" solution from an administrative point of view. We believed that it would be more valuable for youth to encounter and overcome typical administrative challenges and typical lack of interest or resistance from students. We also believed that if their peers were aware that the survey was developed by youth and understood its purpose, that they would be more inclined to participate and provide a thoughtful response to the questions.

We worked with the youth researchers and their FRC adult advisors to brainstorm examples of difficulties they might encounter, and to identify ways to overcome them. We asked them to consider if they would be comfortable making presentations in homerooms, lunchrooms, schoolyards? if they would do better singly or in pairs? We helped them calculate how many presentations they could make during a normal homeroom period? an extended homeroom period? and how many presentations and how many days would it take in each school, using a combination of single and paired presenters?

Results of the Youth Survey

The youth survey researchers were able to obtain almost 800 responses. Metis arranged for data entry and analysis of the survey. We met with them to review and interpret the findings, and to help them write up selected findings. One student's article made the front page of The Savannah Herald! To recognize and celebrate their achievement, we hosted a reception for the youth survey researchers and their families. At the reception, we presented them with an Award of Merit and a letter of recommendation that could be used to help them secure summer employment. The findings from the surveys were interesting and ones that could be addressed by the FRC. For example, some youth stated they were not allowed to attend after school programs. This suggested the need to consult with parents to learn what concerns they may have, for example, about their children's safety in traveling from school to the FRC and home. If this is so, the FRC could develop a "safety corridor" in collaboration with police or neighborhood watch members to supervise and monitor travel routes for children and reassure their parents about safety after school. Youth categorically expressed the need for instruction in the arts. This is particularly important because opportunities for development of skills, talents and aesthetic understandings are extremely limited in public schools.

Research, on the other hand, consistently demonstrates the importance of the arts in promoting academic skills, discipline, self-esteem and a sense of citizenship and humanity. Based on the results of the youth survey, the FRC is examining ways to incorporate professional artists, musicians and dancers to help youth develop capabilities and interest in these fields. Finally, a truly encouraging finding was that so many youth believe that they can make a positive change in their communities. They repeatedly indicated an interest in performing community service that involves upgrading the appearance and livability of housing in their neighborhoods. This finding highlighted another potential area for the FRC to create a plan for youth involvement in community development and revitalization. In these times youth are faced with a worsening of their living conditions: declines in the quality of education; a deterioration in the social life of their neighborhoods with increased drug use and associated violence as well as decreased employment opportunities.

Frustrated adults are beginning to place blame on adolescents for their "weaknesses and irresponsibilities" -- most pointedly seen in mean spirited attitudes towards teen mothers that scapegoat them as causes of family and community devolution rather than symptoms of wider social and economic problems. Our experience with the youth surveyors directly contradicts such teen critics. The FRC youth surveyors enjoyed working with Metis. They demonstrated (and we hope we reinforced) qualities of social competence, problem solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose in fulfilling their commitment to the evaluation work. All of these characteristics demonstrate internally resilient, socially responsible and caring youngsters. Our experience with the youth participants at the Family Resource Center was, in fact, inspirational. It has strengthened our commitment to incorporate youth as much as possible into our consulting work. We would encourage others to do the same--and to build upon and utilize the sources of youthful strength and energy. This type of respectful work with youth reaffirms the idea that learning, information and knowledge has a direct relationship to social life and that service to community is a worthwhile life goal. It returns the education of youth to its primary function to develop capabilities which are of value for the welfare of the whole community.

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