Youth Participation in Evaluation:
Young People Should Be Seen AND Heard!

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Introduction

This paper reports on the evaluation of two Australian educational initiatives that involved a high degree of youth participation in the evaluation process. Both evaluations involved capturing youth perspectives through photographic portfolios as one of the data collection methods, in order to portray young people's understandings of the relationship between leadership and the potential to create change in their communities.

The paper firstly describes these initiatives and provides a brief overview of the evaluation findings in relation to each initiative. It then explores some of the issues and challenges that surround youth participation in the evaluation of educational programs.

The Case Studies

Case Study One: ruMAD? (Are You Making a Difference?): Promoting a Culture of Youth Philanthropy in Schools

In 2001 the Education Foundation sponsored a pilot program to engage primary and secondary school students in developing local community development initiatives. The Education Foundation is an independent philanthropic organisation that promotes public education in schools in the State of Victoria. One of its school programs, ruMAD?, is based on the belief that when self-confidence and leadership skills are nurtured in young people, they are more likely to feel empowered to make changes in their own lives and in the world around them. One of the ways that this program aims to engage young people in this process is to encourage and provide opportunities for student-led experiential learning that builds sustainable links between school and the broader community. This is a key principle of the Foundation's social change model that emphasises 'change not charity'.

The Pilot program involved approximately 400 primary and secondary schools. An evaluation of the pilot was conducted in 2004 by the Centre for Program Evaluation at The University of Melbourne. The Foundation was keen to find out the extent to which the ruMAD? program was achieving its objectives and what could be learnt from the pilot schools to inform the program's future growth. The evaluation design comprised three phases:

1. Interviews with key informants (program staff and management) in the Foundation to clarify their information needs and evaluation questions;

2. A survey of all ruMAD? schools; and

3. Development of case studies of nine schools that had implemented the ruMAD? concept in different ways and at different levels of complexity.

The schools included:

- two schools (one primary school and one secondary school) that implemented MAD Day [1]only;
- three schools that implemented full projects[2];
- two schools (one primary school and one secondary school) that created Student Foundations[3]; and
- two schools (one primary school and one secondary school) that created Student Foundations and implemented full projects.

In this paper we are focussing on the third phase of the evaluation, that is, the case studies. These were developed through data gathered from observational school site visits, school documents such as School Charters (strategic plans) and student photographic records, as well as student and teacher focus groups. However, for the purposes of this paper we are limiting our discussion to portraying students' experiences (through their eyes and the eyes of their teachers) of becoming agents of change in two different settings.

Example A: The Garden Club

The students at an inner-city primary school helped to build an elephants' enclosure at the Melbourne Zoo. This project arose from a class visit to the Zoo. The teacher explained that the students "were keen to help plant vegetation in the new elephant enclosure and that has become an ongoing activity for the school". A spin-off of this project was that the students also established a Garden Club. One of the students proudly explained that they had "developed a playground with new trees and flowers and found better ways in recycle our rubbish".

Photograph 1: Gardening Club Students:

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[1] MAD (Making a Difference) Day is a one-day activity that allows students to explore concepts of student action that can contribute to positive change in the community.

[2] MAD (Making a Difference) Projects are based on student identification of a issue of concern, the causal factors contributing to the issue, and then the development and implementation of a project that is designed to address the issue.

[3] MAD Student Foundations provide a way for students to make a difference in their community through the process of allocating community grants based on student-identified values.

The teacher explained that the fact that the children had initiated these classroom projects was a critical factor in the program's success:

> *My kids were concerned about playground safety so they researched and monitored what was happening in the playground and they really wanted to improve it. If children are interested in doing it and believe in what they are doing, it becomes more meaningful to them.*

She also added that the program's focus on experiential learning meant that students:

> *…were able to see the change. This is especially important for primary children because if the change is not easily observed by the children, then it just becomes another classroom exercise for them.*

This example illustrates how young children can be engaged in evaluative enquiry that is implicit in experiential learning, in this case, assessing a need and noting evidence of change.

Example B: Making Connections with Older People in the Community

Students in a small semi-rural primary school "wanted to find ways to promote a stronger sense of belonging to the community for both young people and the elderly" (Principal). They raised funds for the local Aged Care residence and visited the elderly residents regularly.

The effect of this experience was twofold: The students felt that they had not only understood "the importance of helping the community" but also had learned about the strength of "working together as a group and putting ideas together". As a result of the project the Principal reported that:

> *The children are now more caring and confident students who have the ability to communicate and get along with a wide range of people. The students have an awareness of the needs of people in the last years of their lives. This program has provided an ongoing link with people in aged care. It has bridged the gap between the young and the elderly in our community. They have become more community minded and talk of our school as a community now rather than an institution detached from the community.*

Overall, the evaluation found that that students and teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the value of ruMAD? programs as they had made a significant difference to students, schools and local communities. Students reported that they had acquired organisational and leadership skills as well as developing more self-confidence. Teachers noted that students took greater responsibility for their own learning and acquired a better understanding of the value of giving. Some schools reported that they had become more community-minded and had developed strong partnerships with the local community. Overall, schools had been creative in adapting the original ruMAD? program model to suit local needs. Some schools built the program into transition programs for Year 7 students; others developed whole-school community projects to strengthen school/ community partnerships.

The next section describes a youth leadership program and how photographic images taken by students were used to evaluate the potential of the pilot program and the site on which it was conducted.

Case Study Two: The Glenormiston Leadership Pilot Program

Off-campus leadership and development programs for Year Nine students are commonplace in non-government schools in Australia. Many of these schools have established well resourced sites (campuses) away from the main school site that offer students in the middle years a curriculum experience that is integrated and geared to social development. More recently, government schools are introducing alternative Year Nine programs as a means of enhancing student engagement in learning during these years. However, off-campus leadership and development programs are not so accessible for students in government schools. One alternative school, the Alpine School, has been established in Victoria, as the name suggests, in the high country. Students who attend government schools apply to spend a term at the Alpine School and its success is reflected in the high level of competition for limited places.

On the strength of the success of this leadership and development school, a consortium of educators in the south-west of Victoria designed a pilot program that aimed to deliver similar innovative and high quality leadership and enterprise educational programs to secondary school students. The four-week program was conducted at Glenormiston, a rural university campus that offered agricultural courses, during November/December 2003. The purpose of the pilot was twofold: (a) to assess the suitability of the Glenormiston site as a school like the Alpine School; and to review the leadership and enterprise program model to inform any further development of the program should the consortium be successful in its bid to acquire ongoing funding from the State Government.

Thirty-eight Year Nine students (14-15 years) from 10 secondary schools across Victoria took part in the pilot program. Individual and team-based activities such as abseiling, rock climbing, bush-walking, equine management and public speaking that may not normally be offered as part of a traditional school environment were conducted over the four weeks of the program. The logic underlying these activities was that they would provide a mechanism to encourage young people to develop a

4

stronger sense of self, enterprise, leadership skills and a greater awareness of their impact on the environment.

Photographs 4 & 5: Abseiling and Horse Riding at Glenormiston

The purpose of the evaluation was to assess the suitability of the Glenormiston facility as a potential site for a leadership school; and to review the logic of the pilot program model. Focus groups were chosen as the principal form of data collection in order to capture a range of perceptions and beliefs of young people and teachers who were taking part in the program. Other sources of data were site visits, observational notes, individual interviews with management, document analysis that included program design material and student photography, as well as an anonymous post pilot student survey.

The evaluation findings deemed Glenormiston as a suitable site to deliver a youth leadership and enterprise program. For example, the open spaces of the rural setting and the activities it offered, provided a reflective environment that encouraged young people to take responsibility for, and to see a purpose in their learning; to perceive themselves as learners and thinkers; to recognise and to articulate their individual strengths; to work collaboratively; and to develop a sense of community responsibility.

Students described Glenormiston as being ideal for the Leadership Program as "it is in the middle of everything that you could possibly want – it is close to the sea, the mountains, farms, lakes and the bush". In contrast to their lives in the city, they found the setting as being "in a world of its own; there is absolute peace … with fresh air and lots of open space"… and "more time to do things without distractions".

Photograph 6: Student's Representation of Glenormiston's tranquility

Students also told us how the learning environment at Glenormiston enabled them to explore "new and exciting ways of learning which have allowed us to learn for ourselves" …and "where no one tells you what to do, instead the teachers just encourage us to try new things".

The program culminated in the students collaborating in order to produce a series of Community Learning Projects that focused on an a particular community issue such as *Increasing Student Engagement*, *Improving Links Between Neighbouring Primary and Secondary Schools* and *A Healthy Food Policy for the School Canteen*.

Although these student initiated projects were successful, we noted that that deeper involvement of students in the development, implementation and evaluation of the program could have extended opportunities for students to develop their capabilities even further.

Reflections on Youth Participation in Program Evaluation and Development

Real and significant youth participation involves young people taking an active part in all stages of decision-making on issues that affect them. Wandersman, Snell-Johns, Lentz, Fetterman, Keener, Livet, Imm and Flasspohler (2005) argue that:

> *Inclusion* [of key stakeholders] *is thought to be an important way of facilitating ownership of the evaluation process and use of evaluation results by all stakeholders to guide practice and program improvement.*

Some ruMAD? programs, particularly those where students established formal Student Foundations to raise funds for charity, exemplified principles of authentic performance (Sabo, 2003) within a philanthropic context. The authenticity relates to the real work that students can do in gathering evidence to establish a genuine need, clarifying the logic or plausibility of what they plan to do in order to address this need, and then reflecting on the effects of their activities.

The provision of such genuine opportunities for young people's involvement in program development is consistent with empowerment evaluation approaches that:

> *aim to increase the probability of achieving program success by: (1) providing program stakeholders with tools for assessing the planning, implementation, and self-evaluation of their program, and (2) mainstreaming evaluation as part of the planning and management of the program/organisation* (Wandersman et al (2005) p.28.

Facilitating students to develop focused and realistic questions to drive their philanthropic initiatives, and teaching them to use some simple evaluation enquiry strategies and tools in collaboration with others, may increase chances for students to experience success. For example, drawing on Owen's (2006) forms of evaluation for program development, the kinds of questions young people might ask as they move through the key stages of program development are:

- What specific problems do we want to address? What are our needs? Where/how could we find useful information? …*Initial planning*

- How is the program going? What seems to be working? Do we need to make any changes? …*Implementation*

- Did it meet our needs? What outcomes were there for students and teachers? What steps should be taken to improve the program? …*Impact*

An example of this approach is the ruMAD Project carried out by students at a small rural primary school. They identified the environmental impact caused by the increasing use of plastic shopping bags as an important issue that they could address. Having clarified, the scale of the issue, they studied the composition of rubbish tips and landfill in the local area as well as counting how many people used plastic bags and how many bags each person used when they left the local supermarket. Armed with this information, they designed, constructed and sold re-useable cotton shopping bags in their town. To evaluate the impact of their initiative they conducted a survey of shoppers. Their results showed that they had, indeed made a difference in their community as there had been a reduction in the number of plastic bags used by shoppers as a consequence of their work.

Photograph 7: Students Involved in the Re-usable Shopping Bag Project

Purposeful engagement in key stages of program development, such as this example demonstrates, can provide young people with a portfolio of tools that may assist them to construct their identities as change-makers, or at least, how to tackle an issue in a logical way. In other words, "the act of doing becomes the act of becoming as people grow into their roles and responsibilities" (Fetterman, 2003, p. 90). Also, young people are well placed to collect data from their peers as not only can "they can blend into programs, see everything, and gain the trust of other youth easier than can adults [but] who knows what youth want more than youth?" (Youth Participation in Community Research and Evaluation, 2002, p.5).

The major strength of the ruMAD? program is that the projects are student-led, although facilitated by a teacher. This requires a teaching style that is underpinned by principles of participatory or collaborative learning and a clear logic about how such projects fit with curriculum goals. Such enlightened pedagogy promotes:

> *Capacity building and community ownership that enables program personnel and participants to perform empowerment evaluation – starting from "where they are at" and working to higher levels of evaluation capacity* (Wandersman et al, p.31).

Teachers involved in the ruMAD? Evaluation spoke enthusiastically about the benefits that flowed from genuine student participation in program design, implementation and review. As part of this process, many teachers encouraged students to use photographic images to comment and reflect on their learning. They regarded photography as a way that students, particularly young students, could show evidence of what they learned through their projects. This activity was built into the curriculum as an assessment task, thereby assigning value to the learning that occurs in the ruMAD? program as an integral part of the curriculum, rather than an extra curricula activity.

The Glenormiston Leadership Pilot also involved student participation, in this case through reviewing the choice of location as a potential site for a youth leadership program and the program activities that they had experienced. Their photographic journals proved to be a valuable way of communicating their impressions of the efficacy of the pilot.

In the next section, the paper focuses on the use of photographs in evaluating youth programs in relation to its value in the two case studies.

The Use of Photographic Portfolios in Evaluating Youth Programs

The two Australian evaluations that are cited in this paper illustrate how young people's views and insights were able to enrich the evaluation process. While the focus groups enabled us to gain a good sense of what students thought about their experiences of the respective programs, it was the students' visual images through what they chose to photograph that brought their comments to life.

The evaluators were able to draw upon photographic portfolios created by students[4] during the programs as a means of framing images that portrayed their understandings of the relationship between leadership and the potential to create change in their communities, and of the suitability of Glenormiston as a potential student leadership site. The photographs were taken during the implementation of the program before the focus groups took place. Thus the students had free rein in what they chose to frame, capturing their perspectives of their achievements and experiences in general.

For example, one student's photograph (see below) of an indoor group discussion session conveys a relatively passive session as two teachers talk to the group. In contrast, excitement and action is so evident in images taken by other students of horse riding and abseiling activities (Photographs 4 & 5).

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[4] All photographic and written portfolios were obtained with student permission.

Photograph 8: Student's Photograph of a Class Activity

These photographic portfolios formed an important component of the final evaluation reports and serve to demonstrate the power of photography in documenting student perspectives of each program.

We considered that it was important to give a high profile to the student perspectives in the evaluations of these two educational initiatives. After all, they are the recipients of the programs, and having experienced them, "are in a good position to generate their own solutions" (Wandersman et al (2005) p.34).

As participants who had a 'lived experience' of the internal workings of each program, the students were well placed to pick up on subtleties that may not be apparent to an outsider or even their teachers. The students' photographs provided a meaningful way of communicating the value that they placed on their experiences (Wandersman et al. (2005), p. 32). For example, the photographic image below of the two young women who raised funds to establish a teenage fiction library at a local hospital conveys a sense of pride and achievement in their effort to make a difference to the lives of teenage patients.

Photograph 9: Teenage Fiction Library in a Local Hospital

The use of student photography proved to be a particularly useful and inclusive way of enabling young people to participate, particularly where more conventional methods of data collection through verbal input may have limited representation of student viewpoints.

The use of different data collection strategies meant that students were given the opportunity to contribute in a variety of ways to this interactive evaluation process. Catering for different styles of communication and learning, such as visual and kinaesthetic, may also help to gain a more accurate picture of how students with limited literacy or who are shy experience these kinds of programs.

This commitment to social justice in evaluation naturally flows from helping young people to "develop their capacity for intelligent judgement and action by supplying them with methods, tools, techniques, and training to improve their programs through the use of evaluation" (Wandersman et al. (2005), p.34). Thus, a broad approach to data collection not only helps to address issues of equity and inclusiveness but also increases the likelihood of revealing information that may not have been drawn out through the focus groups alone.

These additional sources of data also contributed to the triangulation of the evaluation data. For example, it allowed us to match photographs with supporting written comments that were obtained through the focus groups in the final reports which reduced the possibilities of misinterpreting the data provided by the students.

However, there are limitations in using photographic evidence in evaluations of youth development programs. In these evaluations, the student photographs and reflective journals were created prior to the evaluation; that is, these tools were part of the requirements of the student projects. Due to time constraints, we did not ask the students to talk about their choice of photographs, and this may have added richness to the data.

A related issue was whether the teachers played a censoring role in which photographs were selected – and if so, what images did they want to portray? The truth may not be portrayed in a single image (Becker, 1978). This warning signals the care that evaluators should take to enhance the trustworthiness of visual forms of data, such as photographs, by using multiple images and other forms of evidence (Prosser, 1998). There is also the potential for bias in terms of who selects the photographs and who interprets the images; the participant photographer or the evaluator?

Nevertheless, employing data collection methods in the evaluation process such as photography provides a mechanism for the student voice to be taken seriously; a medium for young people with limited verbal skills to present their views; and for the worth of a particular program to be measured in student terms.

Conclusion

We believe both programs described in this paper have the potential to extend students' capacity to engage in participatory evaluative enquiry as a means of enhancing plausibility of their projects; linking them to curriculum goals; and creating frameworks for achieving real change in their communities. However, this requires teachers who also understand the process of evaluative enquiry to guide students in their journeys of sharpening purposes of projects, identifying needs, clarifying strategies, collecting and analysing information, and negotiating and communicating ideas. It also requires teachers who are comfortable in working with students in truly participatory ways.

There was no doubt that the high profile given to the student perspectives illustrated with photographs in both evaluation reports, drew attention to the purpose and worth of each of the respective programs. As a postscript, the Glenormiston program was not extended from the pilot. The quality of the program model was not in question, but the politics surrounding ownership and future use of the site put any further development of the youth leadership and development program on hold. However, the ruMAD? Program continues to expand into more schools where it is now more frequently used as a focus for youth leadership and development in the curriculum.

From our perspectives as evaluators, finding ways to portray the perspectives of young people, particularly those whose written and verbal skills are limited, is essential if we are to portray how they experience programs and interventions accurately. The use of photographic evidence is one way, and, as we discovered through these evaluations, visual images in collecting evidence and reporting evaluation findings may be more powerful than what words can convey.

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