YOUTH VOICES: EVALUATION OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

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Abstract: When conducted with sensitivity and reflexivity, participatory action research (PAR) can be an empowering process that is particularly relevant for engaging young people in reflection and dialogue for social change. As the theory and practice of PAR evolve, researchers have evaluated the experiences of community participants, using both qualitative and quantitative approaches. However, only a limited number of evaluations have focused on PAR processes undertaken with youth, and few published papers have reported on involving youth in the evaluation. This article addresses the process of enabling youth to participate to their fullest ability in an evaluation of a PAR project called Youth Voices. The analysis draws on feedback questionnaires from community evaluators, minutes and notes from team meetings, and the researchers' experiences and observations. The authors reflect on lessons learned that can be helpful to others considering participatory evaluation research with youth. The study revealed limitations in employing participatory evaluation with at-risk youth, including challenges posed by their psychosocial development and maintaining participants' engagement throughout the processes of participatory evaluation. These lessons shed light on key tensions in using participatory evaluation and challenge the implicit assumption that a higher level of participation is necessarily better when working with youth. A central question is posed: What level of participation is optimal to ensure authentic community decision-making in a PAR project without overwhelming youth participants?

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Résumé :   Lorsqu'elle est dirigée avec sensibilité et réflexivité, la recherche action participative (RAP) peut être un processus valorisant, particulièrement pertinent pour amener des jeunes à réfléchir ou à discuter de changements sociaux. Dans l'évolution de la théorie et de la pratique de la RAP, les chercheurs ont évalué les expériences des participants communautaires en utilisant autant des approches qualitatives que quantitatives. Toutefois, peu de ces évaluations se sont concentrées sur des processus de la RAP auprès de jeunes, et il n'existe que quelques articles qui soulignent la participation de jeunes à leur évaluation. Cet article examine les processus permettant aux jeunes de pleinement participer à l'évaluation d'un projet de RAP qui porte le nom de *Youth Voices* (Voix Jeunesse). L'analyse repose sur des questionnaires de rétroaction provenant d'évaluateurs communautaires, de notes et comptes rendus de réunions d'équipes, ainsi que des expériences et observations des chercheurs. Les auteurs se penchent sur les leçons tirées pouvant s'avérer utiles pour d'autres dans l'utilisation de la recherche sur l'évaluation participative auprès de jeunes. Cette étude met en évidence les limites de l'évaluation participative auprès de jeunes à risque, notamment à cause des défis posés par leur développement psychosocial, ainsi que le maintien de l'engagement des participants pendant tout le processus d'évaluation participative. Ces leçons mettent en évidence les principales tensions dans l'utilisation de l'évaluation participative et remettent en question la supposition implicite à l'effet qu'une participation plus élevée est forcément préférable pour travailler avec les jeunes. Une question centrale se pose : À quel niveau la participation est-elle optimale pour assurer une prise de décision communautaire authentique dans un projet de RAP, sans surcharger les jeunes participants?

Adolescence is a key developmental stage for health promotion. However, opportunities for youth to exercise citizenship can be frustrated by stigmatizing attitudes and social discouragement from their communities (Valaitis, 2002; Watt, Higgins, & Kendrick, 2000). Young people have not routinely been closely involved in the planning of services and community decision-making processes (Watt et al., 2000). This arguably diminishes youth's democratic standing in relation to their community and the state (Higgins, 1999). The World Health Organization's *Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion* (WHO, 1986) emphasizes that people's participation in their own health decisions is essential for enhancing personal skills and strengthening community action.

Participatory action research (PAR) is a potentially empowering process through which disadvantaged groups, such as youth, can

increase control over and transform their lives (Hagey, 1997; Minkler et al., 2002). The intellectual roots of PAR emerged in the developing world from the work of Freire (1972) and Habermas (1979). It was recognized that traditional research processes resulted in inequitable relationships between researchers and participants. However, participatory research requires shared power and control over decision-making with young people, rather than domination of the process by researchers (Green et al., 1995). PAR aims to affirm the "legitimacy of the knowledge that [youth] are capable of producing through their verification systems, and it enables them to use this knowledge as a guide for their actions" (Choudry et al., 2002, p. 76).

The principles of PAR are based on negotiation, consensus, commitment, and collaboration of all involved (Cave & Ramsden, 2002). However, in evaluating such projects, researchers have primarily used qualitative techniques that tended to treat project participants as subjects (Arches, 2001; Howrey, 1998; Lindsey & McGuinness, 1998), which is arguably antithetic to the principles of PAR (Choudry et al., 2002). More participatory approaches to evaluation arguably fit better with the paradigm of participatory action projects (Burke, 1998). The literature is peppered with calls for more youth-driven participatory evaluations of PAR projects, but relatively little guidance is available.

In this article, we reflect on our experiences with a participatory evaluation (PE) of a PAR project called Youth Voices (Ridgley, Maley, & Skinner, 2004), where adolescent co-evaluators were actively involved in the design, implementation, data collection, analysis, and use of results. Drawing on an analysis of feedback questionnaires from the evaluation team members, minutes and flip chart notes from team meetings, and the researcher's experiences and observations, the authors reflect on the process of enabling youth to participate to their fullest ability in a participatory evaluation. Burke's (1998) model of participatory evaluation is used as a framework to guide discussion. The lessons learned may be helpful in assisting others undertaking a participatory evaluation.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

A review of PAR evaluation studies reveals several limitations from the vantage point of authentic youth involvement in PE. The majority of recently published PAR studies are geared toward an adult population and/or did not use a participatory evaluation approach.

It was common for researchers to design and moderate focus groups of lay people whose assigned role was to identify issues in the PAR program. In terms of PAR projects with youth, researchers commonly evaluated their experiences using qualitative and/or quantitative evaluation methods that treated the participants as subjects (Arches, 2001; Baldwin, Rawlings, Marshall, Conger, & Abbott, 1999; Diaz et al., 1999; Higgins & Reed, 2001; Howrey, 1998; Sharma & Deepak, 2001).

There are a limited number of participatory evaluations of PAR projects and, more importantly, there is a notable lack of youth involvement in the design and implementation of the evaluations of youth-oriented PAR projects. It would appear from the published literature that researchers are more likely to collaborate with adult community stakeholders in the development of program evaluations than with youth involved in these projects (Diaz et al., 1999; Lindsey, Stajduhar, & McGuinness, 2001; McDuff, 2001; Naylor, Wharf-Higgins, Blair, Green, & O'Connor, 2002; Porter, Avery, Edmond, Straw, & Young, 2002; Quintanilla & Packard, 2002; West & Graham, 1999).

Moreover, in the few cited participatory evaluations of youth-driven PAR projects, youth were rarely fully involved in all phases of the evaluation process. In most cases, the researchers designed the evaluations, from the data collection methodology to data analysis, with varying levels of youth input. Gosin, Dustman, Drapeau, and Harthun (2003) involved adolescent students and their teachers in the evaluation of a PAR drug resistance strategies curriculum. The teachers developed the evaluation tools and collected the data, while the youth remained as subjects in pretests and posttests. The youth were involved in the process evaluation through filling out observation forms throughout the PAR process. However, it was the teachers, not the students, who were regarded as experts and research partners in the evaluation of the project. The students were rather seen as "important sources of information during the pilot studies, the field-testing, and the evaluation of the lessons" learned (Gosin et al., 2003, p. 375). Poland, Tupker, and Breland (2002) reflected on the design and politics of youth PAR evaluation, focusing in particular on the challenges inherent in PE (e.g., tradeoffs between depth of involvement and time required). The youth were enabled to direct the nature and content of the evaluation (e.g., ability to alter or veto the participant observer notes). Poland et al. (2002) were committed not to steer the youth too far away from their central focus of producing peer education materials and to keep the time commitments reasonable;

therefore, they designed the process evaluation protocol and collected and analyzed the evaluation data (albeit with extensive youth input). Checkoway and Richards-Schuster (2003) took more of a theoretical approach by discussing different roles that youth may be able to take on in PE, which included subjects, consultants, and partners.

YOUTH VOICES EVALUATION

Youth Voices is a participatory action research component of an applied research program called TeenNet (<www.TeenNet.ca>) based at the University of Toronto and York University (Skinner, Biscope, & Poland, 2003; Skinner, Maley, & Norman, 2006; Skinner, Morrison, et al., 1997). The Youth Voices project called for the collaboration of university researchers, community organizations, and three youth communities. These comprised a group of homeless youth, a group of youth at risk for community violence, and a group of urban youth.

The researchers partnered with community organization staff to apply a six-phase model (EIPARS) for engaging youth in the PAR process to address community issues (Ridgley et al., 2004). EIPARS is a cyclical model that guides youth through the phases of:

1. **E**ngagement, in which the research team developed a rapport with Toronto-based community organizations that served youth to collaborate with them to address issues that were important to them;
2. **I**dentification, in which the researchers supported them to identify community-based issues;
3. **P**lanning, where the communities and researchers partnered in creating plans on how they would like to take community action to address their concerns;
4. **A**ction, where they developed and implemented action projects to raise consciousness about the issues within their communities;
5. **R**esearch, **R**eflection, and **R**eward, in which the communities engaged in a participatory evaluation of their action projects and the overall process;
6. **S**ustainability, which involved the ongoing efforts to continue identifying and addressing community concerns.

Figure 1 is a visual representation of the EIPARS model, of which the R and S phases are central and ongoing components within the project (Lombardo, Morrison, Biscope, Poland, & Skinner, 2003).

Figure 1
EIPARS Model of the Youth Voices Project
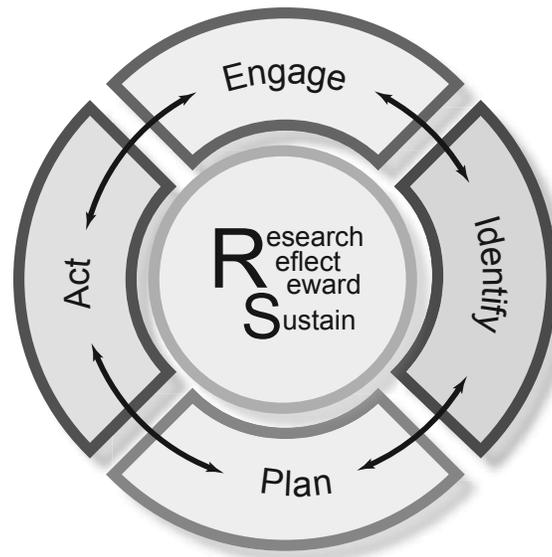
Using this model, each group of youth identified priority issues affecting their lives and collectively developed and implemented community actions to address the issues (Table 1). Homeless youth wrote articles for an Internet newspaper to raise awareness about their life circumstances. Urban youth gave presentations about global tobacco issues to engage other adolescents to critically think about the negative impact of tobacco companies. Youth at risk for community violence took photographs and gave school-based presentations to combat violence faced by teens in their neighbourhood. Table 1 provides a summary of the issues and action projects of each youth community.

EVALUATION DESIGN

A participatory evaluation approach was used to promote community ownership of the Youth Voices project through building youth's capacity to design and implement the project's outcome evaluation protocol. The researcher (Chen) applied principles of PAR to collaborate with the project facilitators and youth participants (Soltis-Jarrett, 1997). She worked with each youth group to engage them to reflect upon their project experiences for the design, implementation, and analysis of the outcome. The PE enabled the youth participants to learn more about the strengths and limitations of the project, as well as use the results to make improvements.

The strategies used to promote diverse youth participation in the Youth Voices outcome evaluation will be described to set a context for the lessons learned. The PE processes in which the three communities participated will be described together, as the approach taken to engage the evaluation teams was consistent across the groups. Burke's (1998) steps of PE provides our guiding framework: (a) deciding to do it; (b) assembling the team; (c) making a plan; (d) collecting the data; (e) synthesizing, analyzing, and verifying the data; (f) developing action plans for the future; and (g) controlling and using the outcomes and reports.

1. *Deciding to do it*. When the EIPARS model for Youth Voices was developed, a protocol for the evaluation of project outcomes was incorporated to measure the success of the project. The research team decided on a participatory outcome evaluation: (a) to remain consistent with the tenets of PAR used in the project, (b) to build the youth participants' skills and capacity in evaluation, and (c) to better ensure the evaluation would be meaningful and useful for the participants. As mentioned, the PE was situated in the Research, Reflect, and Reward component of the project. The researcher aimed to engage youth in a PE of the project that initially involved collaborating with the partner community organizations to implement a youth-friendly PE. She worked with the three communities separately because each group was tackling different issues. In addition, the communities were geographically, culturally, and socio-economically distinct.
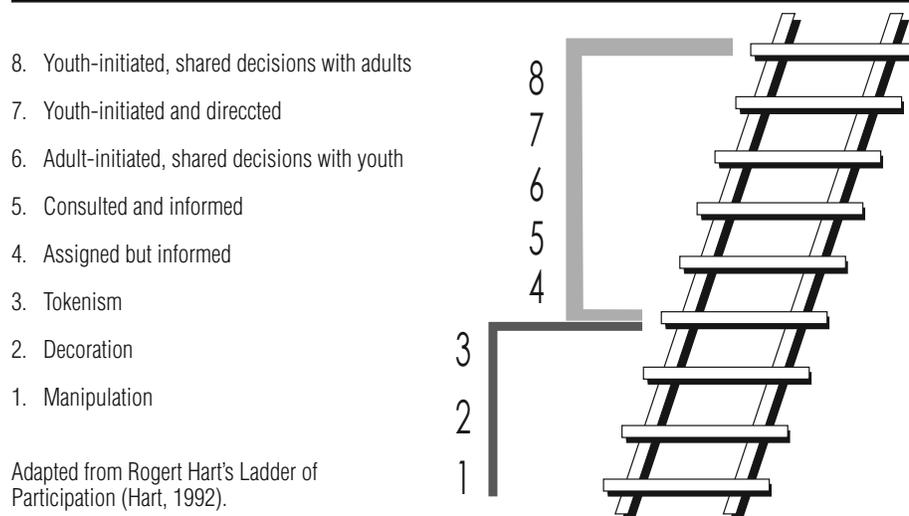
Table 1
Community Groups Involved in Youth Voices

Community	Community-identified priority issues	Action project
1. Urban youth	• Global tobacco issues	• Interactive, multimedia presentation on global tobacco issues • Youth-friendly website on global tobacco issues
2. Street-involved youth	• Stereotypes against their community • Shelter living • Housing • Lack of social support for street-involved youth	• "Life on the Streets" opinion articles posted on Internet-based youth newspaper
3. Youth community at risk for neighbourhood violence	• Neighbourhood violence	• Multimedia presentation challenging community violence

However, the overall framework guiding the participatory outcome evaluation was applied consistently across all three Youth Voices communities.

2. *Assembling the teams*. A common assumption in PAR is that youth participants will be eager to take an active role in developing the project's evaluation protocol. However, the timing of the evaluation, in relation to other project components, affects the degree of participation that they can manage (Poland et al., 2002). To be sensitive to this, the researcher recruited the evaluation team members when the youth had more time available, which was during or after each group's community action projects. The researcher and community agency staff described PE in youth-friendly language and invited the project youth to participate as co-researchers in the evaluation. Suggestions for goals of evaluation included making improvements to the project and building community capacity in terms of evaluation and research skills (Barnsley & Ellis, 1992). The youth were presented with a diagram of the Ladder of Participation depicted in Figure 2 (Watt et al., 2000) and asked to determine their level of participation for each phase of the evaluation process. The researcher suggested that higher levels of youth participation would increase their potential for collaborative decision-making, which may lead to more meaningful evaluation procedures and results for the project stakeholders.

Figure 2
Hart's Ladder of Participation

8. Youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults

7. Youth-initiated and direccted

6. Adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth

5. Consulted and informed

4. Assigned but informed

3. Tokenism

2. Decoration

1. Manipulation

Adapted from Rogert Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1992).

Three distinct evaluation teams were formed. Group A's team included seven youth members, Group B's team had two, and Group C's team varied from at least three to more for any given meeting. Table 2 presents a demographic profile. Group A and B evaluation teams met at the university, while Group C's team met at the partner community organization.

Table 2
Demographic Profile of Youth Participants and Facilitators

Community	Youth participants	Facilitators
1. Urban youth	Sex: 7 females, 1 male Age range: 16 to 19 Mean age: 17 Ethnicity: 4 SE Asian youth, 3 Caribbean youth, 1 SE Asian/Middle Eastern/African youth Project involvement: 7 active, 1 non-active participant. School/work status: 7 students, 1 looking for work	Sex: 3 females School/work status: 2 academic facilitators, 1 evaluation researcher Ethnicity: 1 European facilitator, 1 North American facilitator, 1 Central Asian researcher
2. Street-involved youth	Sex: 2 females, 2 males Age range: 19 to 22 Mean age: 21 Ethnicity: 3 Aboriginal youth, 1 N/A Project involvement: 4 active participants School/work status: Homeless	Sex: 3 females, 1 male School/work status: 2 academic facilitators, 1 community organization facilitator, 1 evaluation researcher Ethnicity: 1 European facilitator, 1 North American facilitator, 1 Central Asian facilitator, 1 Central Asian researcher
3. Youth community at risk for neighbourhood violence	Sex: 3 females, 8 males Age range: 12 to 17 Mean age: 13, Mode age: 15 Ethnicity: 2 African youth, 3 Caribbean youth, 1 African/Caribbean youth, 2 SE Asian youth, 3 N/A School/work status: 10 students, 1 N/A 4 youth lived in geographical community at risk for neighbourhood violence, 7 youth lived outside geographical community at risk for neighbourhood violence	Sex: 4 females, 4 males School/work status: 2 academic facilitators, 4 community organization facilitators, 1 evaluation researcher Ethnicity: 1 European facilitator, 1 North American facilitator, 2 Caribbean facilitators, 1 African facilitator, 1 Central Asian researcher, 2 N/A Geographical Community: 2 community organization facilitators lived in geographical community at risk for neighbourhood violence, 5 facilitators lived outside geographical community at risk for neighbourhood violence

3. *Making a plan*. A youth-friendly approach was taken to the planning meetings in an aim to promote authentic youth participation. Burke (1998) states that participants need to see tangible evidence of their contribution during the planning phase. Group discussions were facilitated with the use of a flip chart that recorded and displayed the decisions and plans for each group. The flip-chart notes were summarized and posted for the following meeting, and meeting notes were regularly e-mailed to the youth evaluation teams.

In all three evaluation teams, the youth decided to be involved at *Level 8: youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults* throughout the planning phase. The researcher trained the youth on qualitative and quantitative methods. Each team engaged in discussions about various methods of collecting data (observation, focus group, interviews, paper and pencil format, surveys, group meeting format) and various types of research questions (open-ended, semi-structured, structured). Opportunities for youth decision-making in the methodology included choosing the key stakeholders, data collection methods, and tools. The youth relied on their experiences in the project to identify key project areas that should be evaluated and the corresponding questions. They identified skills that they wanted to learn in this PE process and were engaged in setting the agenda for meetings and prioritizing the evaluation plans (Higgins & Reed, 2001; Koch, Selim, & Kralik, 2002; Lather, 1991). They were supported to continually reflect upon and revise the research plan while moving the work forward (Koch et al., 2002). They also determined the amount of time and resources they needed to undertake data collection. The teams developed two types of evaluation tools, one geared to the youth participants and one geared to the facilitators, both of which could be used in either focus group or interview formats.

After designing their evaluation tools tailored to what they wanted to investigate, the youth were given the opportunity to incorporate the EIPARS model into their evaluation as is, or modified to suit their needs. Typically, project evaluation for each community focused on the following key topics: strengths and limitations with respect to the project, group process, decision-making, action project, skills, resources, and supports.

4. *Collecting the data*. The researcher developed and conducted interactive training workshops on face-to-face interviewing, telephone interviewing, focus group moderating, and observer note-taking. Additional one-on-one training sessions were offered to the youth co-researchers if they so desired. Five one-and-a-half-hour sessions enabled

each evaluation team to determine their data collection methods, create evaluation tools, and participate in the training workshops.

Teams A and B collected their data at the university, and Team C collected data at their community organization. Both settings had rooms where interviews were conducted and audiotaped with minimal disruptions. During this stage, the evaluation team members participated primarily at *Level 7: youth-initiated and directed,* as they were knowledgeable and trained in the data collection methods and techniques. The youth co-researchers asked the researcher to help collect some data, as an observer note-taker or interviewer. She also remained available on-site to provide for support and consultation.

The project participants were informed about data collection and given the opportunity to participate on a voluntary basis. The demographics of the interviewees are presented in Table 2. Across the three communities, a total of 4 focus groups, 20 face-to-face interviews, and 4 telephone interviews were conducted. Each focus group was facilitated by one or two youth co-researchers, while another youth took observer-notes. They met immediately after the focus group to discuss their observations. Every interview and focus group was followed by a meeting between the youth data collectors and the researcher to debrief and address any areas of concern.

5. *Synthesizing, analyzing, and verifying the data.* The interviews and focus groups discussions were transcribed. The researcher transcribed the data she collected, while outside transcribers were used for the rest to maintain anonymity of the subjects. Ten transcripts were cross-checked with the audiotape for consistency in transcriptions. Taylor and Bogden's (1984) grounded theory and analytic induction methods were used for the analysis. During data analysis, the youth participated at *Level 6: adult-initiated, shared decisions with youth*. To prevent overburdening the youth with time-consuming data analysis and to enhance the consistency of analysis, the researcher conducted the data analysis. The purpose of data analysis in a PE is to reach an understanding of human experience that is grounded in trustworthy data (Lather, 1991). The results must speak to the felt needs of a specific group in ordinary language (Lather, 1991). According to Taylor and Bogden (1984) and Lather (1991), project participants who are willing to read draft reports can assess the validity and credibility of the researcher's analysis. Thus, the researcher invited all three communities to read draft reports of the results to verify her interpretation of the data and to offer additional or alternative perspectives and material. Two academic facilitators and five youth participants took part in this process. A coding scheme was developed using 10

outcome evaluation transcripts representative of the subsamples of focus group and interview transcripts of the youth participants and facilitators. A 55-code scheme was applied to the transcripts using NUDIST (N6) qualitative software (reference software).

6. *Developing action plans*. The analysis resulted in key findings on project group processes and recommended improvements for the project from the perspective of youth participants and youth group facilitators (presented in Tables 3 and 4). The youth intended the results to be used by Youth Voices participants to improve the project during the next cycle of the EIPARS model. The PAR project used a cyclical framework that involved a plan for the community to take increasing ownership of and sustain the process of identifying issues and addressing them within their communities. With the consent of the youth, the results, reports, and recommendations were disseminated to the community organizations, project participants, project academic board, and funders.

Table 3
Group Process Strengths and Challenges

STRENGTHS

1. **Open communication and shared decision-making between youth and facilitators**
"We got to do what we wanted and everybody listened to what we had to say… [The facilitators] said, 'Whatever you guys want to do it on, do it'. I'm like, it's all good, but we got to do what we wanted to do." – youth participant
"The choices that we made were mostly made by the group." – youth participant
"We could tell [the group] what ever we think, we could be open with them and also tell them even if you don't like them, I mean if you don't like the ideas, you could just tell them." – youth participant

2. **Sustaining participation can enhance teamwork and increase understanding of complex community issues**
"When a group works together over a long period of time, they develop a special ability to…work together because they know each other really well and…[can interact] with their whole self …Also, it gives them time to really understand an issue…to move to more complex issues instead of taking on an issue that may be more simple." – facilitator
"It was good to see certain attitudes and certain attitudes changing, during the project and really getting a feel for further attitudes on other subject matter…You could see…certain people, you know, thinking about it more." – facilitator
"But, working through the group and after the time was up, when the choice came to move on, everyone agreed to [it] because I really think that it started to touch everybody. You start to learn things and it's getting interesting. It's like…let's just keep going." – youth participant

3. **Being youth-friendly increases youth participation**
"[The staff] made the meetings to suit our time schedules as much as possible. Whenever the most people could come, that's when the meetings were. They even met [one youth] separately so that [he/she] could still be involved." – youth participant
Question: What are the positive experiences you've had working on the project? "The flexibility."
– youth participant

"…because there is a power imbalance with the youth and the facilitators … I think that the facilitators did a very good job in terms of being sensitive to that … they did make an effort to hear the point-of-view of the youth." – facilitator

ISSUES

1. **Time constraints are a challenge for people doing participatory action research**

"It was like, okay, there's a time-line (louder) [and] we gotta finish this project by then, but yet we're still struggling with some of the issues around here." – facilitator

"It was a little overwhelming because we knew we had so much to get done…trying to get everything done by the end of the 2 months and that's one of the main reasons why it did continue on because some of the things we wanted to have done, we didn't have done. Plus more funding came in and more time." – youth participant

"We were being pushed forward to get the work done when we were supposed to, but for the most part we kind of didn't know … if we were going to finish everything on time … also [it depended on whether] people showed up on time, it was really hard for [us to] script." – facilitator

2. **Group meetings can lead to some voices unheard**

"…some of the other youth may have, maybe in a different setting, in a one-on-one setting, been able to express a bit more of their point-of-view. But, there was a handful of the youth that were more vocal and I think that it at times would overpower … it didn't give us a chance to hear the point-of-view of the quieter youth." – facilitator

"I was very able to express my views in the group because I was a very outspoken person." – youth participant

"Sometimes I think you wanna say but ummm, you don't wanna say because you don't wanna hurt other people's feelings or you don't wanna express something against someone else's opinion. Well because you don't know what other people will say to your response…." – youth participant

"Sometimes there's varying levels of ways that people feel comfortable participating in the group and sort of varying levels of ways that people can approach the group." – facilitator

3. **Challenges in sustaining youths' interest in dialoguing about the issues**

"Sometimes, too much talking." – youth participant

"Maybe make the discussion a little bit more entertaining to get their attention … I could see with the kids that maybe, you know, instead of three hours of discussions over the issue a week or something. Maybe like an hour and a half or something and then maybe something more integrated with like an activity." – facilitator

"I think there was also some frustration because there was some resistance [from the youth] and then there was some movement around critically addressing things and then … because of all the outside influences … they wouldn't stay there. And I think that's fair. And, I think there's constant things that are happening and I think that's one of the challenges … in the project that's trying." – facilitator

"In terms of the activities, because they're young and want sometimes they want to, like, move around … they like to do stuff maybe like role playing … you know so they're not like okay, we're sitting around talking." – facilitator

4. **Youth can become unfocused during the project**

"Well, sometimes we did get out of control, we went off topic and stuff, but most of the time, we worked as a team and we did accomplish what we had to accomplish on that day." – youth participant

"I think we could've had a lot of work done, but the staff kept us on track. So like, it's a good thing that they were there because a lot of times, we would drift away from what we were supposed to be doing and they brought us back on track." – youth participant

"And it's understandable, if they have difficulty paying [attention] to something that they don't feel is as important or isn't a part of what they wanted completely. But, sometimes I think that there are distractions that are going to occur in any group meeting." – facilitator

The researcher collaborated with the Group A youth participants and academic facilitator to reflect upon the results and revise the recommendations in their report, which enhanced the usability of the

Table 4
Suggested Improvements to the Project

1. **More active group activities that promote youth creativity and understanding of issues**
   "More time, you need to give us more time to take the photographs than learning stuff." – youth participant
   "I think there should be, like, we should go out more field trips and we should get more magazines." – youth participant
   "In terms of the activities, because they're young and want, sometimes they want to like move around … they like to do stuff maybe like role playing … you know so they're not like okay, we're sitting around talking." – facilitator

2. **Move at a faster pace**
   "It needs to be shortened." – youth participant
   "The process in creating the project could be changed a little bit to maybe ..ahh.. to maybe make the project move at a faster pace or be more entertaining for the kids." – facilitator

3. **Increase community decision-making opportunities to build community ownership**
   "If the youth were involved in planning [the sessions] as well and if we were able to meet more often with the community partners, you know how there's two organizations working together if we were all able to meet every week and plan the session together I think that would add to it and … everyone would be more on board and more aware of what to expect each session and there wouldn't be as many struggles." – facilitator
   "Maybe giving [the youth] more opportunity to take direction." – facilitator
   "Maybe an improvement could be how could we encourage the youth or be more effective at building that ability of them, the ownership, come up with interesting and creative ways to build ownership." – facilitator

4. **Provide more options for youth to communicate**
   "Facilitators could think about more strategies to optimize everyone's point-of-view to come across. If not talking, maybe people could write down what their thoughts are anonymously … you know, have different ways of communicating, not just in a group setting because it is somewhat intimidating at times for the youth I think." – facilitator
   "I think we needed to have more break-down meetings with the kids, where it's just like progress things, like, 'Well, how do you actually feel about this?' … I think that was something that we really missed because we kind of just kept going on going." – facilitator
   "I think maybe something that I would look at doing is trying to structure little tasks and things to try to meet everybody's individual learning styles and stuff like that, so I think that's something that we could look at."– facilitator

5. **Recruiting more youth participants**
   "Well, if they get more youth, it will be a bigger voice and that way we can tackle bigger projects." – youth participant
   "If there were more people in the group then I would say [that I'll continue participating]." – youth participant
   "The staff could improve the project by … if they have more youth participating." – youth participant

report by the project stakeholders. They chose to participate at *Level 8: youth-initiated, shared decisions with adults* to use the evaluation results and develop action plans with their project facilitator. Due to the protracted period of data analysis, the researcher was unable to re-establish contact with the original PE participants from communities B and C to engage them in providing input for the recommendations in their community reports.

7. *Controlling and using outcomes and reports*. According to Burke (1998), the data should remain in the hands of the stakeholders, who can learn from them and use them to improve the project. Once again, result reports were disseminated to the key stakeholders of the project. Group A planned to use the results to recruit new youth participants. In addition, the researcher developed a facilitator's workbook on the participatory evaluation process that may be used by Youth Voices for the next EIPARS cycle (Chen, Poland, & Skinner, 2003).

LIMITATIONS OF PE WITH AT-RISK YOUTH

Sustaining Youth Involvement

The study revealed limitations in employing participatory evaluation with at-risk youth, including challenges posed by their psychosocial development and maintaining participants' engagement throughout the processes of PE. We had difficulty capturing and sustaining youth interest and involvement in the evaluation research over time. We believe there are several explanations for this, some inherent in the PE approach and others arising from the nature of the participant group.

While extensive effort was made to involve youth in all phases of the evaluation research, the fact remains that the impetus to evaluate at all was driven as much or more by funders and the interests of academic researchers (seeking to validate and improve a model/approach) as it was by a strong desire among participants for additional (more formal, research-based) feedback on process and outcomes. This was complicated by the fact that for many or most of the youth participants, their involvement was a one-time thing, lessening their personal stake in future PAR initiatives.

This brings us to a second set of considerations related to the nature of the participant group. The teens ranged in age from 12 to 22 years old,

which comprised the three stages of adolescent development: early, middle, and late adolescence. Young people's interest and focus are constantly changing and developing throughout adolescence (Eakin, 1994). This is further complicated by the day-to-day challenges faced by at-risk youth. Therefore, teens should perhaps not be expected to participate to the same extent or in the same format as adults, and it has been suggested that time-limited and task-specific opportunities would be more successful (Eakin, 1994). As revealed in this study, using group discussions with at-risk youth highlights a methodological limitation of PAR with special populations. Although they valued the opportunity to provide input, it was difficult for the adolescents, especially the younger ones, to stay attentive and engaged in the process. The provision of detailed minutes of the evaluation team meetings was also ineffective, as the youth rarely read them. However, summarizing the flip-chart notes and displaying them during the following meetings triggered the teams to reflect, negotiate, and discuss the working evaluation plans. Due to their developmental stage, teenagers have difficulty with the slow pace of adult committee processes, which can discourage youth from participating in research (Eakin, 1994). McLeroy and colleagues (1994) also argue that formalization and structure, which is necessary in research, may actually inhibit grassroots participation. Perhaps more could also have been done to make the work relevant and engaging for youth, although much attention was given to doing so throughout the process.

Confidentiality and Bias in Participatory Evaluation

Participatory evaluation puts participants in an awkward position because the anonymity often characteristic of other more traditional approaches to evaluation research is absent. Of necessity, the youth involved in participatory evaluation are the same youth who were program participants, and their research subjects are their peers and the program staff whom they have come to know during the course of the project. This presents unique challenges in terms of both confidentiality and the avoidance of "bias," issues that young adolescents may find especially challenging.

Peer perceptions grow increasingly more significant as adolescents individuate from their parents and develop a greater sense of self (Daniels, 1990). During data collection, the younger teens were more likely to bias the data collection with their personal values and were less capable of staying neutral about their relationship with the interviewees. For example, one of the younger male youth expressed

reluctance about interviewing someone who he believed was not going to cooperate. Bolognini, Plancherel, Bettschart, and Halfon (1996) conducted a study of self-esteem in early adolescence and found that boys experienced reduced self-esteem and increased self-criticism if their peer relationships did not meet their personal expectations. The transcript revealed verbal intonations of the youth evaluator that communicated annoyance, impatience, and frustration toward the interviewee. This frustration could be a reflection of his concern about his peer having a negative view of him, which impacted on his confidence in collecting the data. In addition, the transcripts revealed that the younger co-researchers expressed themselves more emotively and were less apt to ask for clarification or probe for additional information. Bolognini et al. (1996) stated that the self-esteem of boys was lower at age 12 than at age 14. While PE poses challenges for any participants, age is an important factor that needs to be considered when designing a PE with youth. A practice implication would be to design data collection training workshops with sensitivity to the youth co-researchers' developmental stage. Younger adolescents need more time to role-play potentially uncomfortable scenarios and learn how to reduce personal biases, recognize their own values, and strengthen their interviewing skills. More research is needed to measure the impact of age on adolescents' ability to effectively take on the role of project evaluator.

LESSONS LEARNED AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Project Participant Bias

After their active involvement on the Youth Voices PE teams, the experiences of the co-evaluators were gathered using a feedback questionnaire (questions/results are in Table 5). The majority of the respondents were satisfied with the evaluation questions and data collection methods; however, one of the youth took exception to them, writing, "Since we all know each other, we might answer our questions not honestly" and "It was a good evaluation process, but an anonymous interviewer should have been the interviewer." The fact that all interviewees were personally known to them created discomfort among some interviewers and raised concerns about the possibility of self-censorship and skewing of results.

An internal threat to validity was a tendency toward social desirability between the data collectors and interviewees. The training workshop included a discussion about the risk of biasing the interviewee's

responses if the evaluators' view of the project is communicated verbally or non-verbally. The importance of respecting individual views and maintaining confidentiality between the data collectors and the respondents, despite future project group work, was emphasized. Several of the youth who implemented the project evaluation told the researcher that respecting confidentiality would be easy for them. An assumption underlying their comments is that they would not hear anything negative or uncomfortable about the project. Despite their

Table 5
Evaluation Team Feedback Results

Question	10 participants
My opinions mattered when the team made decisions about the evaluation process	5 strongly agree 5 agree
I had the support that I needed from the evaluation researcher while on the evaluation team	9 strongly agree 1 agree
I had the support that I needed from the other youth members while on the evaluation team	6 strongly agree 4 agree
I am satisfied with the evaluation questions for the youth and facilitators	6 strongly agree 3 agree 1 n/a
I am satisfied with the data collection methods	6 strongly agree 2 agree 1 strongly disagree 1 n/a
I think the outcome evaluation results will help us to know if our action is really making a difference to the community	5 strongly agree 4 agree 1 n/a
I think the outcome evaluation results are useful for making improvements to the Youth Voices project	6 strongly agree 3 agree 1 n/a
If I was asked again, I would get involved on another evaluation team	4 strongly agree 5 agree 1 disagree
Did you learn or build on any skills by being involved in the evaluation team?	6 yes 3 somewhat 1 no

n/a = information not reported
This anonymous feedback questionnaire was voluntarily completed by 9 youth participants and 1 community organization facilitator. The instrument consisted of eight Likert-type questions that gave them the choices of (1) strongly agree, (2) agree, (3) disagree, and (4) strongly disagree. If they disagreed on questions 2–8, space was provided for their comments. The ninth question asked if they learned or built on any skills by being involved on the evaluation team, and they were asked to list the skills. It concluded with two open-ended questions.

assumptions, the youth co-evaluators were encouraged to recognize and write down their personal views about the project and express them when it was their turn to be interviewed.

Another experience that potentially indicated participants' vested interest in a favourable review occurred during the development of the data collection tools. Three of the youth on one evaluation team devalued the inclusion of questions that asked about the negative aspects of the project, expressing that nothing negative ever happened. The researcher explored the beliefs of these youth and their discomfort in inquiring about negative aspects of the project. She stated that there may be negative views about the project that youth were unaware of that could be valuable in making project improvements. After the discussion, the team decided to include in the tools questions on the negative aspects of the project. By giving the youth participants an opportunity to reflect upon and dialogue about the results reports and participate in revising the project recommendations, the researcher fostered a more balanced view of the project.

To address this potential threat to validity, an implication for practice would be to incorporate multiple quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. When youth are evaluating their own project, researchers need to engage all evaluation participants (co-evaluators and interviewees) to acknowledge and work through their assumptions about the project, to understand interviewer bias, and to respect confidentiality. PE practitioners need to openly acknowledge and discuss the potential impact of previous relationship dynamics between the data collector and the respondent. By doing so, the researcher can enhance the youth's ability to effectively plan and implement the evaluation and improve the quality of data.

Overburdening Participants

The issue of participatory evaluation being a time-consuming process was raised in the evaluation team feedback results. One of the youth co-researchers stated that the process "seemed a little too long." According to Burke (1998), meaningful participation by key stakeholders in PE can require a great length of time, and some practitioners caution against not overburdening the participants. After data collection, it took a few months to complete qualitative analysis and submit the results reports to the stakeholders. When the researcher attempted to re-establish contact with youth participants of Groups B and C to reflect upon and discuss results, she was unsuccessful because many

of the youth moved away, decreased their contact with the partner community organizations, or ended their participation in the project. A similar experience was reported by Poland et al. (2002). Youth involvement began decreasing after the major project activities (data collection, action project) were over. However, PE typically requires sustaining youth participation for the use of the results.

To cushion the burden of PE being a time-consuming process, a practice implication would be to discuss the timeline of the PE so youth can anticipate any waiting periods. Ongoing youth-friendly activities can potentially keep the youth interested and their momentum elevated.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the Youth Voices participatory outcome evaluation resulted in meaningful information on project group processes, issues, and improvements that can be reflected upon and used by stakeholders. Although the youth evaluation teams were diverse in their socio-economic backgrounds, ethnicity, and age, they shared a capacity to become co-evaluators for the project. All who gave feedback felt valued in the decision-making processes and indicated that they received their expected level of support from other team members. The youth co-researchers integrated their knowledge and lived experiences of the project for development of the outcome evaluation protocol. The majority of the evaluation team felt that the PE results were useful for making project improvements. They would also participate in another evaluation if asked.

Skills gained by the youth co-evaluators included research, communication, and leadership. Involving youth in a PE of their PAR project enhanced their sense of ownership over the project and led to improvements grounded in the community's knowledge and experiences. However, the study highlighted an important tension within PE with young people: engaging them in "praxis" and research training can be challenging for researchers (making the work relevant and engaging when long-term commitment to process and outcomes may be limited) and problematic due to their stage of adolescent development.

Another methodological concern was the potential for participants to have a vested interest in a favourable review of the project. A tension existed in weighing the value of taking a participatory approach to evaluation while maintaining validity and reliability of the results.

The youth participants conveyed a sense of pride in their project that was empowering, but may have potentially biased the results. Practitioners need to validate the participants' positive "lived experiences" as they ask them to consider the gaps and weaknesses of their project. A multi-method quantitative and qualitative approach to evaluation can decrease the level of participant biases toward a positive evaluation.

The issues explored suggest that there are limitations to strictly adhering to the theory of PE for a participatory action research project with youth in a community context. PE calls upon community members to micro-manage all aspects of a complex evaluation process, which can become overwhelming and ultimately disempowering. The potential for youth co-evaluators to feel overburdened by the responsibilities of managing process details and committing their time to the evaluation must be openly acknowledged and sensitively addressed by practitioners. Providing community participants with the opportunity to choose their level of participation (using the Ladder of Participation) at different stages of the evaluation process could be considered. However, one needs to be reflexive about the potential for being seen to implicitly value "higher" levels of participation as inherently more "authentic" or "empowering" (i.e., participants must be free to chose less dramatic levels of involvement without being made to feel they are "not living up to their full potential" or they are "letting the project down").

We suspect, supported by a review of the literature, that "full" PE is more often the exception than the norm. Our project was no exception. For example, the youth were not directly involved in transcription or initial data analysis. Smith, Monaghan, and Broad (2002) argue that this may be as it should be because of the sophistication of coding and the NUDIST program. Indeed, it may be time to deconstruct the imperative built in to the discourse of PAR that holds that maximum participation is always and inherently empowering. Rather, the central question for participatory evaluation work should be: What level of participation is optimal to ensure authentic community decision-making in a PAR project without overwhelming youth participants?

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