Applying Foundational Evaluation Principles to Youth and Development Programming: A Review

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Based on a review of (i) Utilization-Focused Evaluation by Michael Quinn Patton and (ii) Evaluation Foundations Revisited: Cultivating a Life of the Mind for Practice by Thomas A. Schwandt, this article draws insights relevant to development programming, with a particular focus on youth development initiatives. Evaluation is a systematic inquiry into social interventions like youth programs, aimed at judging their policies and programs based on specific criteria. Applying the principles and concepts from these sources can significantly enhance the effectiveness and relevance of youth development efforts.

The Centrality of Values and Valuing

At its core, evaluation is concerned with valuing, determining the merit, worth, or significance of policies and programs. In youth development, this involves judging whether a program is good, better than another, or worth the resources invested. This process requires setting standards and gathering data to assess performance against chosen criteria.

Key criteria often used in evaluation include relevance, appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, and sustainability. For youth development programs, relevance is particularly vital, focusing on how well program objectives match the needs and requirements of the youth participants, the community, and stakeholders. Explicitly defining these criteria is considered a professional standard in evaluation.

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A challenge in youth development is that various stakeholders may hold different values and priorities, leading to disagreements about what constitutes success. For example, youth may value peer connection and skill-building, while funders might prioritize quantifiable outcomes like job placement or reduced risk behaviors. Navigating these differing perspectives is crucial for effective evaluation. Methods for integrating results across multiple criteria and different stakeholder views are still developing, and the process of making a final synthesis judgment is complex. Stake suggests that the evaluator's task isn't necessarily to have the final word, but to describe the diverse aspects of quality in a way that is accessible to immediate stakeholders. Approaches like using rubrics or numerical weighting can help structure this process, while intuitive, holistic approaches offer a narrative portrayal of value constructed through people's perceptions. Deliberative democratic evaluation frameworks emphasize including beneficiaries' interests and representing major stakeholder views in dialogue and deliberation.

Beyond immediate outcomes, there's growing interest in social impact assessment, which aims to measure the broader social value created by interventions. While methodologies are evolving, assessing the long-term social impact of youth development programs, such as sustained well-being or positive community contributions, remains a critical area.

Understanding How Programs Work: Program Theory and Theories of Change

Effective evaluation goes beyond simply measuring whether outcomes occurred; it seeks to understand *how* and *why* a program achieved its effects. This requires looking inside the "black box" of program operations.

Program theory serves this purpose by documenting a program's internal operations and processes. Specifying the program theory helps evaluators examine not only whether a program achieves intended effects, but also the mechanisms by which it is expected to do so.

Theories of Change (ToC) are related tools that start with a desired long-term goal and map backward, illustrating the expected pathway of change. ToC is valuable for strategic planning, communicating the intended change process, and fostering organizational learning within youth development initiatives. They can be particularly useful for complex interventions or those involving advocacy and policy change related to youth issues. Using a ToC can facilitate learning at individual, group, and organizational levels.

The Political Dimensions of Evaluation

Evaluation practice is inherently intertwined with politics and policymaking. At the micro-level, evaluators navigate relationships with stakeholders and deal with issues of data access and control, which is particularly relevant in community-based youth programs involving diverse participants and organizations.

At the macro-level, the very decision to conduct an evaluation is often a political act. For evaluators working in international development and aid, understanding the politics of policymaking is increasingly important, especially when engaging in policy advocacy for issues affecting youth. A critical political dimension in international aid is the concern for the political and civil rights of program recipients and how power dynamics between donors and local actors can affect local control and the self-determination of beneficiaries. This underscores the need for equity-focused evaluations, which specifically examine whether interventions support marginalized groups, such as disadvantaged youth, in becoming agents of their own development.

Evaluation findings are not simply objective facts that automatically translate into policy or practice. Policymaking involves interpreting evidence within policy arguments that also include generalizations, assumptions, anecdotes, and other forms of

reasoning. Thus, policymakers often engage in "evidence-informed politics" rather than purely "evidence-based policy". Evaluators must understand this dynamic to effectively contribute to decision-making processes related to youth programs and policies.

Promoting Evaluation Use: Bridging the Knowledge-Action Gap

A persistent challenge is ensuring that evaluation findings are actually used to inform decisions and improve programs. The "knowledge-action gap" refers to the difficulty in translating evaluation knowledge into practice.

Different frameworks address promoting evaluation use. Producer-centered approaches focus on disseminating findings, assuming a rational decision-making environment. However, user-centered frameworks, which prioritize the needs and perspectives of intended users, are often more effective in complex development contexts like youth programming. These approaches involve intended users in the evaluation process from the outset, jointly deciding on the design and intended uses. This collaborative approach facilitates evidence-informed discussions and increases the likelihood that findings will be relevant and utilized. Strategies for use can be formalized based on findings, and evaluators can actively facilitate follow-through. Ultimately, promoting evaluation use requires actively working with program staff, participants, policymakers, and other stakeholders.

Professionalism and Ethical Practice

Effective evaluation in development programming, including youth development, demands a high level of professional competence. This involves more than just technical skills; it requires cultivating a reflective practice and a commitment to the social good the evaluation serves.

Professional evaluators need technical skills such as design, data collection, analysis, and reporting.

However, they also need professional practice skills like project management, contextual awareness, fair reporting, and strong interpersonal skills. Evaluation involves critical thinking, which includes skills like interpretation, analysis, evaluation of claims, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Making evaluative judgments requires reasoning from evidence to conclusions, understanding that arguments must be grounded in empirical inquiry while also being persuasive. The credibility, probative force, and relevance of evidence are key properties to consider.

Furthermore, cultural relevance and responsiveness are essential ethical obligations, particularly when evaluating programs serving diverse youth populations. This involves understanding and respecting the values, perspectives, and contexts of different cultural groups involved in the program. Professional standards for evaluation explicitly call for clarifying the individual and cultural values underpinning evaluations.

Ensuring the quality and accountability of evaluations can involve methods like meta-evaluation, a systematic review of an evaluation itself, often using established standards. This process can help determine how evaluations could be improved and whether they demonstrate responsible use of resources.

Conclusion

Evaluating youth development programming within the broader context of development requires a sophisticated understanding of evaluation's foundations and practice, as highlighted in the reviewed texts.

Successful evaluation in this sphere demands a commitment to valuing that is sensitive to the diverse needs and priorities of youth, their families, communities, and program implementers. This involves engaging with stakeholders to explicitly define criteria for success and navigating the complexities of multiple criteria and differing values.

Leveraging tools like Program Theory and Theories of Change is crucial for understanding the complex mechanisms through which youth programs are expected to achieve their intended effects. These tools help move beyond simply observing outcomes to understanding the pathways of change, which is essential for learning and improvement in youth development initiatives.

Evaluators must be acutely aware of and adept at navigating the political landscape in which youth development operates. This includes understanding micro-level dynamics within programs and organizations, as well as macro-level political processes that influence policy and funding. A critical ethical imperative is to conduct equity-focused evaluations that champion the rights and self-determination of marginalized youth and ensure that their voices and interests are brought to the table.

Bridging the knowledge-action gap requires a deliberate focus on evaluation use. Adopting user-centered and participatory approaches that actively involve stakeholders throughout the evaluation process increases the likelihood that findings will be relevant, trusted, and utilized to inform practice and policy. Fostering organizational learning is a key pathway for promoting the sustained use of evaluation findings.

Finally, the practice of evaluating youth development requires professional competence and ethical integrity. This means evaluators must possess strong technical skills, engage in reflective practice, understand the social purpose of their work, and uphold ethical obligations, including paramount importance of cultural responsiveness when working with diverse youth populations.

References

1. Schwandt, Thomas A. 2015. *Evaluation Foundations Revisited: Cultivating a Life of the Mind for Practice.* Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

2. Patton, Michael Q. 2008. *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.