

# Book Review: Youth Participatory Evaluation: Strategies for Engaging Young People

[Book by Kim Sabo, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco; 2008. Reviewed by Robert Shumer]

Participatory evaluation and research developed in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century based on the belief that people engaged in programs could and should have a role in evaluating their impact and effectiveness. Books were written that discussed its theory (Whyte, 1991) and sessions emerged at the American Educational Research Association in 1993 (Cousins and Earl, 1995) that addressed its potential and applicability in the evaluation field. After that the field took off and numerous applications appeared that took on many different forms (Patton, 1997; Fetterman, Kaftarian, and Wandersman, 1996) and participatory work expanded tremendously.

However, when Kim Sabo addressed Brad Cousins, one of the leading figures in the field, who had determined that by the early 1990s, more than 500 studies had been conducted using this form of research, she asked how many studies had involved youth in the process? “After a long pause, he asked, “Do you mean as evaluators?” Kim responded, “Yes.” He then told her that none of the studies had involved youth in the process. Even though many of the studies were of schools and youth programs, none of the “participatory studies” involved young participants (Sabo, 2008).

From this exchange and subsequent work and effort, Kim Sabo Flores has gone on to help develop the youth-led evaluation field and include children and youth as participants in research (Sabo, 2003). Several people and organizations have emerged as leaders in utilizing youth-led evaluation and research as a method of service learning and as an approach to community change and social justice. Youth in Focus in the San Francisco Bay area (London, 2000), the University of Michigan School of Social Work (Checkoway, Dobbie, and Finn, 2003; and the Institute for Community Research in Hartford, Connecticut (2000) are all organizations that are strong supporters of youth engaged work. Those committed to social justice and change from a critical pedagogy perspective (Ginwright, Noguera, and Commorata, 2006) have helped young people to organize to become agents of change in communities.

Sabo Flores’ most recent book is the subject of this review. It is similar, in many ways, to other efforts to lay out the youth-led evaluation process so that young people have a guide to follow in order to actually learn how to conduct such participatory work (Youth In Focus, 2002; Checkoway and Richards-Schuster, nd; Institute for Community

Research, 2000; Shumer, 2007). In one of the only school-based, full year programs that actively engage students in a real research process, The Raffles Institution in Singapore has involved youth in service-learning study as a regular part of the educational program. They, too, have developed a guide for conducting youth-led service-learning evaluation.

Sabo Flores' book has twelve chapters. She begins with the foundations of youth led work and why it has value for all involved. The comments in the introductory paragraph to this review are taken from that chapter and indicate how and why youth participatory evaluation got started and has been sustained. Chapters 2 through 11 cover all the elements of participatory evaluation: designing a project; developing a team; developing a plan; training young people to conduct interviews, focus groups, and surveys; using data collection strategies, including journaling; conducting analysis and report writing; and finally, developing strategies to encourage youth to continue on with the evaluation process. In each chapter Sabo Flores goes into a fair amount of detail to help youth conceptualize the focus of the chapter and then to think about the process for actually implementing the plan.

The value of Sabo Flores' work is in the detail she provides on each of the steps in the youth-led evaluation process and her structural recommendations. Her ideas are always well grounded and she provides many specific examples to help the reader to understand the issues and complexity of the youth evaluation process. The book does this by providing, perhaps, the most direction in actually engaging in each one of the steps in the process. She describes a basic orientation and then provides a detailed list of questions and issues that should be addressed as the evaluation process unfolds.

Perhaps more enriching and entertaining are the many examples she provides from actual research efforts she engaged in over the years. For example, in Chapter 2 (Development, Play, and Performance) she tells a story about working with a street theater group in Harlem where a fight broke out between two young men. It was a real fight. As the story went, Sabo and her colleague tried to stop the fight by breaking up the two men. Having difficulty separating them, her colleague suddenly attacked Kim and started fighting with her. She yelled and called her names and actually wrestled her to the ground. Sabo realized that her colleague was actually engaging the group around the fight, and the fighters, in a play situation, where they had to assess what was going on. The fighters stopped and questioned what the two adults were doing. To make a long story short, they all engaged in recreating the situation that led to the fight. Sabo said: "we are performing you." The unorthodox approach actually led the youth to discuss the problems and to learn how to engage young people in the use of play as an active way to understand how and why phenomena occur. It is through

stories such as this one that the reader gets a sense of how to use various approaches to engage youth in the evaluation process so they can better understand their world and the way to making it a better place.

*Youth Participatory Evaluation* is a welcome addition to the series of books on how to conduct youth-led evaluation. It provides excellent details about the process and the elements critical to responsibly engaging young people in the evaluation of their programs and their world. It is sure to become one of the standard texts on the subject and continues to reflect the enormous, continued contribution of Kim Sabo Flores to the youth evaluation field.

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