

Youth participation in evaluation

Young people should be seen AND heard!

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This study 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 article describes two initiatives: r.u.MAD?, a youth philanthropic program, and the Glenormiston Leadership Pilot Program for Year 9 students, and provides a brief overview of the evaluation findings in relation to each initiative.

The main findings of the r.u.MAD? evaluation were that students and their teachers believed that the r.u.MAD framework had enabled them to make significant differences in their school environments or local communities and that links with local communities were strengthened. Students also reported that their experiences in r.u.MAD? projects had given them increased organisational and leadership skills.

The main findings of the evaluation of the Glenormiston Leadership Pilot Program were that the rural setting and proximity to the sea provided a rich site for leadership program for Year 9 students, particularly those who had grown up in Melbourne. The evaluation also found that the program model was effective in terms of developing skills in leadership and independent learning.

The article also explores some of the issues and challenges that surround youth participation in the evaluation of educational programs that have a strong leadership and empowerment focus. In addition, some comments are made about the use of photographs as an evaluation strategy.

Introduction

The push from governments to increase rates of participation of young people in education, and at the same time, the trend for more and more young people to have part-time jobs presents a challenge for teachers. White and Wyn (2004) argue that the trend to increased part-time work is just one of the effects of social change on increasing the complexity of young people's lives. They also argue that, as a consequence of this complexity, 'young people will be less prepared to be passive recipients of education' (p. 137). In response to such trends, pedagogy is shifting into a climate of engaging students with 'big ideas', and critical and collaborative enquiry. This has led logically to building close school-community links so that students can participate more actively in their studies and build the necessary skills that enable them to become both independent and interdependent learners (Department of Education and Training 2002).

Also, in broader youth social programs, thinking has shifted from seeing youth issues in terms of problems or threats to a focus on youth development 'as the most effective strategy for the prevention of youth problems' (Pitman & Cahill, cited in Sabo 2003, p. 5; Youth in Focus 2002).

The notion of building youth capacity is at the heart of the two initiatives described in this article. Both initiatives are presented as case studies of youth capacity building in the context of educational settings. The authors of this article were commissioned as external evaluators for each of the initiatives. We concluded that, in each case, the initiatives were successful in terms of achieving their stated aims. As such, they may therefore be regarded as rich sources of information by which the social phenomena of the interrelationships of participants with these initiatives can be understood and used in other settings (Hudelson 1994).

Therefore, the aim of these evaluations was to 'provide a rich or "thick" description which interprets the experiences of people in the group from their own perspective ... to develop a theory about how participants accomplish the various actions taking place in the group' (Hudelson 2004, p. 148). In both evaluations there were many kinds of activities to document. In the case of the Glenormiston Leadership Pilot Program, it was particularly important to capture the various dimensions of the site itself to determine its suitability for a leadership program for Year 9 students. In such situations, Hurworth (2004) advocates the use of visual imagery to increase 'potency' (p. 166) of evaluations. We used photographs in conjunction with interview data to convey the lived experiences of the students and teachers involved the r.u.MAD? and Glenormiston programs.

Case studies of the r.u.MAD? and Glenormiston initiatives are described, and then some reflections on how young people could be involved more actively in evaluation in projects that they play a leading role are identified. We present some of

the issues that we considered in relation to the methodology of using photographs in the evaluations.

The case studies

r.u.MAD? (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, r.u.MAD?, promotes 'active youth participation to improve their communities' (Black 2003, p. 14), and is based on the principle that young people can provide valuable input to developing community networks and partnerships (Spierings 2001; Stokes & Tyler 2001). The program embraces similar ideals that are described in broader Victorian Government policies designed to strengthen local communities through increasing connectedness and building capacity. The assumption underpinning these policies is that '[harnessing] the energy and ideas of local communities [enables them to] build effective partnerships with government and community agencies to plan for and address local needs, build local leadership and foster community networks' (Department for Victorian Communities 2006). The imperative is to provide more effective government and use of resources at the local level. From an education perspective, getting young people involved in local community-building initiatives provides opportunities for them to engage in authentic learning activities and issues that matter to them.

These ideals are also described in the recently developed Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) that set out the expectations of student learning (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2005). This policy sets out the knowledge and skills that students should achieve in the learning domain of Civics and Citizenship. For example:

[Students] use democratic processes when working in groups on class and community projects. They participate in school and community events and participate in activities to contribute to environmental sustainability or action on other community issues (Level 5).

The r.u.MAD? Program provides a framework and materials for teachers to facilitate student-led initiatives such as:

- MAD (Making a Difference) Days—a one-day activity that allows students to explore concepts of student action that can contribute to positive change in the community

- MAD (Making a Difference) projects which are based on student identification of an 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
- MAD Student Foundations that provide a mechanism for students to make a difference in their community through the process of allocating community grants based on student-identified values.

Such initiatives sit comfortably with the VELs Citizenship and Civics learning domain. For example, the r.u.MAD? Program that aims to engage young people in this process, provides opportunities for student-led experiential learning that builds sustainable links between school and the broader community. This is a key principle of the Education Foundation's strategic social change model to address local issues or problems.

Approximately 400 primary and secondary schools in regional, rural and city areas were involved in the program. These schools varied in size from small country schools to very large inner-city schools and, in many cases, r.u.MAD became a part of a whole-school curriculum. Other schools incorporated the r.u.MAD Program into a specific year level or as part of their elective program. In most cases, students were guided by their teachers in the selection of project topics based on a high level of student interest and issues that were of particular concern to their local community.

An evaluation of this 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 r.u.MAD? 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 r.u.MAD? schools.
- 3 Development of case studies of nine schools that had implemented the r.u.MAD? 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 only*
- three schools that implemented *full projects*
- two schools (one primary school and one secondary school) that created *Student Foundations*

- two schools (one primary school and one secondary school) that created *Student Foundations and implemented full projects*.

In this article we focus 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 article 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 at their school. One of the students proudly explained that they had 'developed a playground with new trees and flowers and found better ways to recycle our rubbish'. See Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: GARDEN CLUB STUDENTS



The class 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 (see Figure 2).

The effect of this experience was twofold: students commented 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.

FIGURE 2: STUDENTS AND RESIDENT AT A LOCAL AGED CARE FACILITY



Overall, the case study evaluations of the nine schools showed that students and teachers were overwhelmingly positive about the value of

r.u.MAD? programs, as they believed that they had made a significant difference to students, schools and local communities. The majority of students reported that they had acquired a greater level of organisational and leadership skills as well as developing more self-confidence. Teachers noted that most students took greater responsibility for their own learning and acquired a better understanding of the value of giving than had been evident prior to the r.u.MAD? program. Many schools reported that they had become more community-minded and had developed strong partnerships with the local community. All schools had been creative in adapting the original r.u.MAD? Program model to suit local needs. For example, 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.

Glenormiston Leadership Pilot Program

Off-campus leadership and development programs for Year 9 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 9 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, and as the name suggests, is located in Victoria’s alpine region. 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: 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 9 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, bushwalking, 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 (see Figures 3 and 4). The logic underlying these activities was that they would provide a mechanism to encourage young people to develop a stronger sense of self, enterprise, leadership skills and a greater awareness of their impact on the environment.

FIGURES 3 AND 4: ABSEILING AND HORSE RIDING AT GLENORMISTON



The Centre for Program Evaluation at the University of Melbourne was commissioned to evaluate this pilot program. The consortium of teachers and regional education personnel that developed the program wanted an external evaluation of 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, interviews with management, document analysis that included program design material and student photography, as well as an anonymous post-pilot student survey.

Schools supplied the students with digital cameras and some basic photographic training that enabled students to compile photographic portfolios as part of their internal assessment of the leadership program. The evaluators ensured that permission was obtained from the students before utilising their photographs in the evaluation.

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 the Glenormiston site as being ideal for the Leadership Program. For example:

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.

For many students, the location offered a significant contrast to their lives in the city. One student described the setting as being:

in a world of its own; there is absolute peace ... with fresh air and lots of open space.

Another student commented that there was 'more time to do things without distractions'.

Figure 5, a photograph taken by a student, reflects many of the students' written comments about the peaceful physical environment.

FIGURE 5: A STUDENT'S REPRESENTATION OF GLENORMISTON'S TRANQUILLITY



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 a particular community issue. These included *Increasing Student Engagement, Improving Links between Neighbouring Primary and Secondary Schools* and *A Healthy Food Policy for the School Canteen*.

Reflections on youth participation in program evaluation and development

Although these student-initiated projects were successful in the eyes of the students and teachers who participated in them, 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.

Some r.u.MAD? 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 in programs such as r.u.MAD?, and teaching them to use some simple evaluation enquiry strategies and tools in collaboration with others, may increase chances for students to experience success (Lau, Netherland & Haywood 2003). 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 r.u.MAD? 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 reusable cotton shopping bags in their town (see Figure 6). 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.

FIGURE 6: STUDENTS INVOLVED IN THE REUSABLE 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 r.u.MAD? 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)

One approach that teachers could use to facilitate program planning and evaluation of student community-based projects is to adapt Fetterman’s (2001) empowerment evaluation three-step process to help students to (1) clarify their mission or vision for their projects; (2) reach agreement about which are the ‘most significant program activities’, then rate and justify the ratings to identify strengths and weaknesses; and (3) set goals for next steps and achieving the desired change and what data needs to be collected to indicate achievement of those goals (see also Fetterman & Wandersman 2005, pp. 191–192).

The next section 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

Teachers involved in the r.u.MAD? 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 r.u.MAD? Program as an integral part of the curriculum, rather than an extracurricular activity.

The Glenormiston Leadership Pilot Program 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.

The photographic images that were produced by these young people enriched 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 students¹ 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 Figure 7) 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 of horse riding and abseiling activities taken by other students (Figures 4 and 5).

FIGURE 7: 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 in Figure 8 of 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.

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.

FIGURE 8: TEENAGE FICTION LIBRARY IN A LOCAL HOSPITAL

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.

A 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 information also increased the trustworthiness of the data (Patton 2002). 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 doing 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? This signals a warning that the whole truth may not be portrayed in a single image (Becker 1978). In this particular evaluation, we were aware of the need to account for multiple perspectives, and, in particular, the realities of the students' experiences,

and the inclusion of student portfolios allowed us to do so. This issue emphasises 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); and to be alert to the potential for bias in terms of who selects the photographs and who interprets the images—the participant photographer or the evaluator? As Hurworth (2004) points out, the use visual images in evaluation is just another, albeit powerful, qualitative data collection technique, and should be subject to 'the same kind of approach and decision-making as any other type of rigorous data collection' (p. 178).

Nonetheless, 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

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. In October 2006, the Victorian Government announced that Glenormiston had been chosen as the site for a new Year 9 Leadership Centre. The r.u.MAD? 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.

We believe both programs described in this article have the potential to extend students' capacity to engage in participatory evaluation enquiry as a means of enhancing plausibility and success of their projects. The two programs link students' projects to curriculum goals; and create frameworks for young people to achieve 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.

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 alone.

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Note

- 1 All photographic and written portfolios were obtained with student permission.

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