

# Involving Youth in Empowerment Evaluation: Evaluators' Perspectives

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**Abstract:** *Empowerment evaluation (EE) aims to teach program stakeholders, including beneficiaries, how to conduct their own evaluations. This mixed methods research study examined how youth are involved in EE. Phase 1 surveyed evaluators to investigate the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth. Phase 2 interviewed evaluators to explore what factor(s) evaluators perceive as facilitating or hindering the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth. The findings show that, on average, youth were involved in EE activities “to a small extent” or “to a moderate extent” and that a number of factors can either facilitate or hinder the involvement of youth in EE.*

**Keywords:** *empowerment evaluation, program evaluation, youth-focused evaluation*

**Résumé :** *L'évaluation émancipatrice (EE) vise à montrer aux intervenants de programmes, y compris les bénéficiaires, la façon d'effectuer leurs propres évaluations. Cette étude de recherche par méthodes mixtes examine le degré de participation des jeunes dans l'EE. La phase 1 a sondé les évaluateurs et évaluatrices pour examiner la participation des jeunes dans l'EE pour les programmes jeunesse. À la phase 2, on a interviewé les évaluateurs et les évaluatrices pour explorer les facteurs qu'ils perçoivent comme facilitant ou entravant la participation des jeunes à l'EE pour les programmes jeunesse. Les résultats montrent qu'en moyenne, les jeunes participent aux activités d'EE « dans une faible mesure » ou « dans une moyenne mesure » et que de nombreux facteurs peuvent faciliter ou entraver la participation des jeunes à l'EE.*

**Mots clés :** *évaluation émancipatrice, évaluation de programme, évaluation axée sur la jeunesse*

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## INTRODUCTION

Participatory and collaborative evaluation approaches are popular among evaluators and program stakeholders. Both of these approaches involve trained evaluators working in partnership with stakeholders in evaluation processes (Cousins & Chouinard, 2012; Cousins & Earl, 1992; Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). To provide guidance to evaluators and stakeholders, evaluation scholars (e.g., Chen, Weiss, & Nicholson, 2010; Fox & Cater, 2011; Gong & Wright, 2007; Langhout & Fernandez, 2015) have conducted numerous research studies on the feasibility and effectiveness of using participatory and collaborative evaluation approaches in various contexts with different populations. Yet published evaluations using participatory and collaborative approaches focus mainly on adult involvement. This mixed methods study examined how youth are involved in empowerment evaluation (EE), a particular type of collaborative evaluation. Specifically, it examined the extent to which evaluators involve youth in EE and what factors facilitate and hinder the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth.

### *Youth involvement in participatory and collaborative evaluation*

Most of the published evaluation studies that include youth involve them as sources of data, study participants, or subjects. In these studies, youth as well as their data are tested, measured, and analyzed by the evaluator, with participating youth likely unaware of how the evaluation processes develop (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). In contrast, when evaluators use participatory or collaborative evaluation approaches, youth can ask questions and formulate strategies to improve the programming they receive (Flores, 2007). In the process, youth can see themselves as active processors of knowledge as opposed to passive recipients (Gawler, 2005; Hart, 1992). This active process leads to greater evaluation capacity building (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Patton, 2008). Likewise, such involvement recognizes youth experiences, knowledge, and expertise, which can be uplifting, emancipatory, and transformative and can help strengthen critical thinking, research, writing, and planning skills (Gawler, 2005; Hart, 1992). Evaluators and service providers may use this information to design meaningful evaluations and improve programming for a diverse group of youth (Chen et al., 2010; Dold & Chapman, 2012). In contrast to adult stakeholders, youth may hold diverse views of a program and its influence on them and their communities (Samuelson, Smith, Stevenson, & Ryan, 2013). For example, Zeller-Berkman, Muñoz-Proto, and Torre (2015) and Samuelson et al. (2013) found that youth program beneficiaries expressed unique viewpoints about their program and its impact that were not previously recognized by adult staff.

Evaluators have used different evaluation strategies to involve youth in program evaluation activities. For example, Exner-Cortens, Wright, Claussen, and Truscott (2021) and Halsall and Forneris (2016) involved youth in evaluation through the use of photovoice, where participants took photographs to capture their views and the impacts of programs. Moreover, Dare and Nowicki

(2019) involved youth in group concept mapping to brainstorm activities, as well as rate, sort, and label important program activities. Last, [Havlicek Curry, and Villalpando \(2018\)](#) and [Roholt and Muller \(2013\)](#) explained their use of youth advisory councils to guide and provide decision making related to program evaluation.

Evaluators may decide not to involve youth in evaluation processes because of selected contexts, limited resources, or their own experiences. For example, the budget and time allotted for the evaluation may not allow for meaningful youth engagement ([Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003](#); [Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015](#)). Given the importance of diverse stakeholder selection and inclusion in participatory and collaborative evaluations, there may also be challenges associated with recruiting diverse groups of youth to participate in evaluations ([Cousins & Chouinard, 2012](#); [Cousins & Whitmore, 1998](#)). Additionally, youth may not be involved for valid reasons or because the program being evaluated is not focused on youth. Alternatively, there may be other circumstances where the involvement of youth may not be ideal ([Froncek & Rohmann, 2019](#)), particularly if their inclusion in the evaluation results in tokenism, rather than meaningful involvement ([Purdue, Peterson, & Deng, 2018](#)).

Youth involvement in program evaluation is not dichotomous (e.g., youth involvement vs. no involvement). As [Figure 1](#) demonstrates, youth involvement in evaluation can be conceptualized along a continuum ([Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003](#); [Richards-Shuster & Plachta Elliott, 2019](#)). Youth may be involved in evaluation as data sources (i.e., as respondents or participants in the evaluation), consultants (i.e., offering guidance on select evaluation components with partial decision-making control), coevaluators (i.e., involvement throughout the evaluation with shared decision-making control), or evaluation leaders (i.e., full immersion in the evaluation with complete decision-making control) ([Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003](#); [Montrosse-Moorhead, 2021](#); [Montrosse-Moorhead, Bitar, Arévalo Gross, & Rishko-Porcescu, 2019](#); [Richards-Shuster & Plachta Elliott, 2019](#); [Roholt & Baizerman, 2018](#)).



**Figure 1.** Continuum of youth involvement in collaborative and participatory evaluation

Adapted from “Youth Participation in Evaluation and Research as a Way of Lifting New Voices,” by B. Checkoway and K. Richards-Schuster, 2004, *Children Youth and Environments*, 14(2), pp. 84–98. Copyright 2004 by CYE Network. Also from “A Practice Matrix for Involving Young People in Evaluation: Possibilities and Considerations,” by K. Richards-Schuster and S. Plachta Elliott, 2019, *American Journal of Evaluation*, 40(4), pp. 533–547. Copyright 2019 by the American Evaluation Association.

## **Empowerment evaluation**

Empowerment evaluation is a collaborative evaluation approach and a way to involve program stakeholders in evaluation activities. The theory behind EE is that those most impacted by the program are able to act as coevaluators (Fetterman et al., 2018). In EE, the evaluator acts a critical friend who takes program stakeholders through the following three steps: (a) developing a mission, (b) taking stock, and (c) planning for the future (Fetterman et al., 2018). The three steps can be repeated to assess change in ratings and plans from one cycle of steps to another. Stakeholders are encouraged to continually cycle through the steps in order to institute a practice of self-assessment. Since Fetterman's introduction of EE at the 1994 American Evaluation Association (AEA) conference, alternative models for conducting EE have also been introduced (see, for example, the "getting to outcomes" 10-step model by Wandersman, Imm, Chinman, & Kaftarian, 2000). However, Fetterman's (2001) three-step method is still the most widely followed of the EE models.

EE with youth would place shared decision-making control with the youth stakeholders, assisted by a trained evaluator (Langhout & Fernandez, 2015). EE with youth would also encourage the selection of diverse groups of youth to actively participate in all phases of the evaluation (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998). While some argue that youth may find it challenging to possess decision-making power, EE with youth would use the following three steps to direct evaluation processes and facilitate decision making (Fetterman, 2001): (a) youth would identify potential program outcomes and investigate whether existing program activities enable the program to achieve such outcomes, (b) youth would identify and prioritize the most significant program activities and rate how well the program is doing with respect to them, and (c) youth would chart a course for future programming, including strategies to achieve the desired program outcomes. Through these steps, it is expected that youth would participate in the evaluation in unconventional ways (e.g., as coevaluators). However, youth would still have access to an evaluator, who plays the role of a critical friend, is knowledgeable about evaluation, and can assist them in their evaluation processes and decision making (Fetterman & Wandersman, 2005; Langhout & Fernandez, 2015; Moreau & Cousins, 2012). From non-EE literature (Dare & Nowicki, 2019), we can ascertain that evaluators may need to provide a lot of guidance and training to youth coevaluators, potentially lessening feelings of agency and self-efficacy. Additionally, the ability to develop an engaging and authentic relationship with the evaluator requires ongoing interactions between the youth and evaluator over time (Syeda, Fournie, Ibanez, & Crooks, 2021). Moreover, it is unclear whether these steps are of interest and developmentally friendly to youth (Exner-Cortens et al., 2021).

Langhout and Fernandez (2015) provide a case study on the involvement of youth in EE. In their work, youth identified a program mission, rated the program activities, created a survey to obtain the ratings of other youth, and used the feedback to plan for future programming. The EE was guided by the evaluators who

facilitated and supported the youth in their evaluation roles as “critical friends” through multiple cycles of the three-step EE process (Langhout & Fernandez, 2015). Youth involvement in this example was possible because of funding and staff support for their involvement. The evaluators noted that youth engaged in the EE became more aware of the issues in their evaluand, which required resources and support to adequately address. To our knowledge, this is the single published example of using EE with youth. Thus, there is little documented knowledge about how evaluators can involve youth in EE. The current study expands the work of these scholars (i.e., Langhout & Fernandez, 2015) and investigates the following two research questions:

#### *Phase 1: Survey*

1. To what extent do evaluators report involving youth in EE of programs targeting youth?

#### *Phase 2: Interviews*

2. What factor(s) do evaluators perceive as facilitating or hindering the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth?

## **METHODS**

### ***Study design***

Using a two-phase sequential mixed method design, this study had both developmental and expansion purposes, as defined by Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989). In terms of development, it used the findings from one method (i.e., a survey) to inform the development of the data collection tools for the subsequent method (i.e., interviews). In terms of expansion, it included multiple phases, each with their own guiding research questions; as such, the scope of the inquiry increased and provided more information on the topic. This design was appropriate for this study because there is minimal information on the involvement of youth in EE and the factors that facilitate and hinder the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth. Phase 1 of the study encompassed the collection and analysis of quantitative survey data. The findings from Phase 1 were used to inform the participant-level questions for Phase 2, which was composed of the collection and analysis of qualitative interview data. The quantitative and qualitative portions were equally important in terms of addressing the topic (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Each phase was analyzed separately, but the quantitative and qualitative findings were merged in the discussion section (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Ottawa.

#### ***Phase 1: Survey***

**Sample:** Criterion-based sampling was used to identify evaluators interested in collaborative, participatory, and empowerment evaluation or youth-focused evaluation. Selected participants were contacted via email. In 2018, approximately 746

AEA evaluators were associated with collaborative, participatory, and empowerment evaluation, and 314 were associated with youth-focused evaluation ([American Evaluation Association, 2019](#)).

**Instrument development:** Data used in this paper was collected from a larger survey on EE and youth-focused evaluation. The survey included 25 questions made up of 2 open-ended questions and 23 closed-ended questions. Screening questions were included to ensure eligibility and collect demographic information. Three questions from the survey focused on the nature of youth involvement in EE to evaluate programs targeting youth, which was the subject of the first research question (see [Table A1](#) in the Appendix).

**Data collection procedures:** The authors used a modified version of [Dillman's \(2011\)](#) tailored design method to distribute the survey link and an information letter to potential participants through email. Each survey question had a different number of respondents due to the option to skip any questions on the survey.

**Data analysis:** Quantitative data analysis took place in SPSS version 25 to calculate descriptive statistics for the survey responses. The two open-ended questions were analyzed by grouping and coding recurring themes and calculating counts and percentages for each group. Each thematic group was presented with its frequency of occurrence.

## ***Phase 2: Interviews***

**Sample:** Criterion-based sampling was also used to identify and contact potential participants for the Phase 2 interview. In Phase 1, 36 respondents indicated interest in participating in the Phase 2 interview, and 12 (33.3%) agreed to participate once they were contacted by the researchers via email.

**Instrument development:** Phase 2 consisted of semistructured interviews informed by the Phase 1 survey findings. The Phase 2 interview guides included open-ended questions with probes for expansion. The questions in the guides asked about the contextual, stakeholder, organizational, evaluator, evaluation resource, external, and other factors that evaluators perceive to facilitate or hinder the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth (see [Table A2](#) in the Appendix).

**Data collection procedures:** The authors emailed an information letter and consent form to evaluators from the Phase 1 survey who indicated an interest in the interview phase. The lead author conducted the interviews over Skype or Facetime, recorded the audio, and transcribed it verbatim.

**Data analysis:** Data analysis occurred in NVivo and followed a systematic and iterative approach to generating meaning from data and testing and confirming findings ([Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2020](#)). The lead author read through each transcript three times to note related passages. She created a list of codes and grouped the codes according to factors that answered the research question for Phase 2. She then transferred the material to a data analysis matrix. The authors then developed explanations for relationships between the codes and generated descriptions of the factors. Each interviewee was assigned a pseudonym for the purpose of including exemplar quotes in the findings section of the paper.

## Trustworthiness

The findings from the surveys and interviews were triangulated with each other to ensure credibility (i.e., confidence) and confirmability (i.e., degree of neutrality)—the first two components of research study trustworthiness posited by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Additionally, member checking (i.e., the process of engaging the participants in a verification of accuracy of the data that represents their perceptions and experiences) was used to further enhance the credibility of this research, in which interviewees were invited to review the initial study findings and provide feedback to verify the accuracy of the data that represents their perceptions and experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The authors also used memo writing throughout the analysis process to describe and document their assumptions, questions, processes, decisions, and analytical actions (Saldana, 2016). An electronic journal was created to track the data analysis process, including communications among the research team and the steps used to create each of the following factors, which provided detail on the analytic process and acted as an audit trail.

Providing detail and an audit trail are both techniques for actualizing other aspects of research study trustworthiness (i.e., transferability, where findings have applicability in other contexts, and dependability, where findings are consistent and could be repeated) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to evaluation scholars like Patton (2002), the credibility of research is strengthened by providing detail about how the researcher has made interpretations of the data and by illustrating interpretations with quotations from interviewees. In the presentation of the findings, we provided thick descriptions to facilitate the transferability of our findings to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick description is useful for providing the research context (Shenton, 2004) and allows us to demonstrate the data's complexity and allows the readers to generate their own conclusions about the situation where the phenomenon was studied (Horsfall, Byrne-Armstrong, & Higgs, 2001; Leininger, 1994; Rice & Ezzy, 1999; Tracy, 2010).

## FINDINGS

### Phase 1: Survey

**Demographics:** Overall, 108 AEA members (13.2%) completed the survey, and 67 (62.0%) of them completed the demographic section. Participants' occupations fell within the areas of education (25.4%), health (23.9%), multisector organizations (20.9%), social research (19.4%), and other disciplines (10.4%). Of this group, 84 (77.8%) had evaluated programs that target youth, while 24 (22.2%) had not. The researchers found that over half ( $n = 36$ , 53.7%) of the 108 interviewees had worked as an evaluator for at least 11 years, while 16 (23.9%) had 6 to 10 years of experience and the remaining 15 (22.4%) had worked as an evaluator for 1 to 5 years. In terms of their use of EE, over half ( $n = 41$ , 53.9%) of respondents indicated not using EE to evaluate programs involving youth, 30 (39.5%) had used EE to evaluate programs involving youth, and 5 (6.6%) were unsure as to whether they had or had not used EE to evaluate programs involving youth.

### **To what extent do evaluators involve youth in EEs of programs targeting youth?**

The 30 respondents who said that they used EE to evaluate programs involving youth were asked if they involved youth in the EE. Of these 30 respondents, 25 answered this survey question. When using EE to evaluate programs targeting youth, over three quarters of respondents ( $n = 21$ , 84.0%) said they involved youth in the evaluation activities, 3 (12.0%) said they did not, and 1 (4.0%) respondent was unsure about whether they did or did not involve youth in the evaluation activities. The 21 respondents who said that they involved youth in the EE of programs targeting youth were asked about the extent to which youth were involved in 14 different actions identified in the literature (Fetterman, 2015; Sheldon, 2016) as EE activities. As Table 1 demonstrates, responses varied by activity, from youth “not at all involved” to involved “to a great extent.” On average, youth were involved “to a small extent” in half of the 14 EE activities and “to a moderate extent” in the other 7 EE activities.

**Table 1.** Evaluators’ perceptions about the extent to which youth were involved in particular EE activities ( $N = 17$ )

Evaluation activities	N	Not at all	To a small	To a moder-	To a great	Mean (median)
		(0) n (%)	extent (1) n (%)	ate extent (2) n (%)	extent (3) n (%)	
Establishing a mission statement for their program/project (i.e., Step 1 of the three EE steps)	16	6 (37.5)	5 (31.3)	3 (18.8)	2 (12.5)	1.06 (1)
Assessing the current state of their program/project to establish a baseline (i.e., Step 2 of the three EE steps)	17	3 (17.6)	5 (29.4)	5 (29.4)	4 (23.5)	1.59 (2)
Reassessing the current state of their program/project for comparison against a baseline (i.e., second cycling of Step 2 of the three EE steps and EE improvement principle)	17	4 (23.5)	4 (23.5)	7 (41.2)	2 (11.8)	1.41 (2)

(Continued)



**Table 1.** (Continued)

Evaluation activities	N	Not at all	To a small	To a moder-	To a great	Mean (median)
		(0) n (%)	extent (1) n (%)	ate extent (2) n (%)	extent (3) n (%)	
Planning program/ project goals/bench- marks for the future (i.e., Step 3 of the three EE steps)	17	4 (23.5)	5 (29.4)	4 (23.5)	4 (23.5)	1.47 (1)
Identifying strategies to achieve program/pro- ject goals (i.e., Step 3 of the three EE steps)	17	4 (23.5)	0 (0)	7 (41.2)	6 (35.3)	1.88 (2)
Identifying credible evidence to collect to assess their ability to achieve program/ project goals (i.e., Step 3 of the three EE steps)	17	2 (11.8)	6 (35.3)	3 (17.6)	6 (35.3)	1.76 (2)
Determining strat- egies to continually collect evidence to assess their ability to achieve program/ project goals (i.e., second cycling of Step 3 of the three EE steps and EE organizational learn- ing principle)	17	5 (29.4)	4 (23.5)	4 (23.5)	4 (23.5)	1.41 (1)
Reviewing program/ project goals for the future (i.e., second cycling of Step 3 of the three EE steps and EE improve- ment principle)	17	4 (23.5)	3 (17.6)	6 (35.3)	4 (23.5)	1.59 (2)
Documenting the current state of their program/project (i.e., EE accountabil- ity principle)	17	1 (5.9)	7 (41.2)	5 (29.4)	4 (23.5)	1.71 (2)
Receiving training on conducting evalua- tions (i.e., EE capacity- building principle)	17	5 (29.4)	3 (17.6)	6 (35.3)	3 (17.6)	1.41 (2)

Evaluation activities	N	Not at all	To a small	To a moder-	To a great	Mean (median)
		(0) n (%)	extent (1) n (%)	ate extent (2) n (%)	extent (3) n (%)	
Receiving training on research methods, including data collection and analysis (i.e., EE capacity-building principle)	16	5 (31.3)	4 (25.0)	4 (25.0)	3 (18.8)	1.31 (1)
Determining the technical knowledge and capacities to collect and analyze evidence of their ability to achieve program/project goals (i.e., EE community-learning principle)	17	4 (23.5)	5 (29.4)	4 (23.5)	4 (23.5)	1.47 (1)
Collecting their own evidence about their program/project (i.e., EE democratic-participation principle)	17	2 (11.8)	6 (35.3)	1 (5.9)	8 (47.1)	1.88 (2)
Incorporating evidence about their program/project into program/project decision making (i.e., EE evidence-based-strategies principle)	17	3 (17.6)	4 (23.5)	7 (41.2)	3 (17.6)	1.59 (2)

*Note.* Of the 21 respondents who said they involved youth in EE, only 17 respondents elected to answer this survey question. Adapted from "Evaluation as Social Intervention: An Empirical Study of Empowerment Evaluation Practice and Principle Effects on Psychological Empowerment and Self-Determination Outcomes," by J. F. Sheldon, 2016, unpublished doctoral dissertation. Copyright 2016 by Claremont Graduate University. Also from "Empowerment Evaluation: Theories, Principles, Concepts and Steps," by D. M. Fetterman, 2015, in D. M. Fetterman, S. J. Kaftarian, & A. Wandersman (Eds.), *Empowerment evaluation* (2nd ed., pp. 193–232), Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. Copyright 2015 by SAGE.

The 21 respondents who said they involved youth in EE were asked why they involved youth in EE, and these respondents were offered the opportunity to provide multiple explanations, if they desired. In total, the 15 respondents provided 25 reasons why they involved youth in EE. More than half ( $n = 9$ , 60.0%) of respondents involved youth in EE to produce more authentic results because youth are viewed as the experts of their lived experience (see Table 2 for other, less frequent responses). The three respondents who had indicated they did not involve

**Table 2.** Reasons why survey respondents involved youth in the EE ( $N = 15$ )

Reasons to involve youth in EE	<i>n</i>	%
To produce more authentic results because youth are experts of their lived experience	9	60.0
To teach youth program stakeholders about evaluation	4	26.7
EE aligns with the empowerment and leadership goals of the program evaluated	3	20.0
To build skills among youth	3	20.0
To give youth agency in designing, changing, and funding programs that benefit them	3	20.0
Because the organization is ready and willing to take risks and be innovative in their evaluation	1	6.7
Because youth are more amenable to learn about evaluation (less defensive)	1	6.7
To improve the effectiveness of the evaluation and the program	1	6.7

*Note.* The percentage column's sum is greater than 100 because respondents could provide more than one response. Of the 21 respondents who said they involved youth in EE, only 15 elected to answer this survey question.

youth in EE were asked why they did not involve youth in EE and were provided with the option to list multiple reasons, if they desired. The three respondents provided a total of four reasons for not involving youth in EE. In particular, the three respondents said that youth were not involved because of multiple reasons, including a lack of stakeholder interest ( $n = 1$ , 33.3%), limited funds ( $n = 1$ , 33.3%), limited time ( $n = 1$ , 33.3%), and limited youth availability ( $n = 1$ , 33.3%).

In summary, 108 evaluators from the AEA Collaborative, Participatory, and Empowerment Evaluation and Youth-Focused Evaluation Topical Interest Groups (TIG) participated in Phase 1 of this study. Most (i.e., 84%,  $n = 21$ ) respondents who self-identified as using EE to evaluate programs involving youth also self-identified as involving youth in the EE activities. Respondents noted that, on average, youth were involved in EE activities “to a small extent” or “to a moderate extent,” which suggests that, on average, youth are involved in EE activities, with some differences in the extent of their involvement across activities. More than half ( $n = 9$ , 60.0%) of respondents who involved youth in EE did so to produce more authentic results because youth are viewed as the experts of their lived experience. Those who did not involve youth in EE did not because of a lack of stakeholder interest or limited funds, time, or youth availability.

### ***What factor(s) facilitate and hinder the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth?***

The sections that follow describe the factors that the interviewees believed facilitated or hindered the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth. These factors include the following: (a) youths' interest and abilities, (b) age of youth, (c) existence and availability of incentives for youth, (d) type of youth

**Table 3.** Factors that facilitate/hinder the use of EE for programs involving youth by type of interviewee experience involving youth in EE

Factor	Interviewees who involve youth	Interviewees who do not involve youth
Youths' interest and abilities	+	–
Age of youth	–	–
Existence and availability of incentives for youth	+ & –	+ & –
Type of youth interactions	+ & –	+ & –
Evaluation structure	+ & –	+ & –
Support from organizations	+ & –	+ & –

*Note.* + indicates at least one interviewee described the factor as a facilitator and – indicates at least one interviewee described the factor as a hinderance.

interactions, (e) evaluation structure, and (f) support from organizations. It should be noted that factors that some interviewees viewed as facilitators others viewed as hinderances (see Table 3).

**Youths' interest and abilities:** Interviewees viewed the youths' interest and abilities as either a facilitator or a hinderance to involving youth in the EE of programs targeting youth. Interviewees who have involved youth in the EE of programs targeting youth thought that youths' interest and abilities to be involved is a facilitator in using EE. As one interviewee said, "So much of [youth involvement in EE] is dependent on whether youth want to be involved" (E1). They commented on how they believe that "curious and motivated youth" will want to be involved in an EE "because they get a feel for what it's like to help others and then they get hooked to that feeling" (E6). These interviewees explained that "the really passionate kids" enjoyed being involved in the evaluation and continued to stay involved because "they got it under their skin then they pulled others into the evaluation" (E2). These interviewees also expressed enthusiasm about youth being experts in their own lives, thus demonstrating their abilities to participate in an EE of a youth program. They commented on their "respect for the lives of young people and their circumstances and the current situations they live in" (E4). These interviewees view youth as capable of participating in EE, and they see their role as providing youth with tools and techniques for getting involved. As one interviewee remarked:

When I meet a group of young people for the first time I say "you're already there, you already know a lot, this [EE] is just one new tool and one new technique that we can use together to help us get where we want to go."

(E10)

Interviewees who have not involved youth in EE thought that youths' interest and abilities to be involved is a hinderance to using EE. They commented on how they believe that youth do not want or have time to participate in an EE, and

they expressed concern about the expertise of youth to contribute to the EE or the potential negative consequences that could result from youth involvement. These interviewees also questioned providing training in these areas, as it was often unfeasible given current evaluation resources and evaluator qualifications. However, evaluators also discussed how the age of youth can influence the evaluation resources and qualifications that are needed.

**Age of youth:** Interviewees viewed the age of youth as a hinderance to involving youth in the EE of programs targeting youth. They commented on how younger youth (aged 12 to 14 years old) are not suitable to participate in EE. They described how it is essential to obtain parental consent to allow youth to participate in EE and expressed their concern that younger youth would be exposed to difficult discussions through involvement in EE. As one interviewee noted, “Younger kids often don’t know the issues, so it can be a challenge bringing these issues to their attention and getting them deeply involved. Do we want them exposed to that at such a young age?” (E5). Moreover, these interviewees explained how EE focuses on the input of participants and requires participants to discuss and share their views with the entire group and stressed that “younger kids are scared and apprehensive to voice their views” (E6). They also discussed that to involve youth of different ages in the same evaluation was difficult because they “couldn’t use the same approach to involve them and there was a real mix of their perceptions of what evaluation is and their ability to do it” (E4). In addition to considering the age of youth when deciding whether or not to involve youth in the EE of programs targeting youth, interviewees also noted that they would be more likely to involve youth when incentives for participation were available.

**Existence and availability of incentives for youth:** Interviewees viewed the existence and availability of incentives for youth as either a facilitator or a hinderance to involving youth in the EE of programs targeting youth. Interviewees who viewed incentives as a facilitator explained how they enticed youth to participate in EE by promising intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. They commented on using an intrinsic reward like “giving the students a product to work on in the evaluation that’s something they can start and finish that they can get from that process that accounts for that time and gives them credibility and feedback” (E1). They also discussed the intrinsic rewards associated with capacity building and collaborative work for youth involved in EE. As one interviewee said, “Through EE young people learn about evaluation and become better leaders in their communities because they learn to listen to others and overcome challenges together” (E4). These interviewees also discussed the use of extrinsic rewards such as money, gift cards, or volunteer hours to reimburse youth for their time and involvement in the evaluation. However, as a hinderance, other interviewees noted that they do not have access to or are unaware of rewards that they could use to attract youth involvement, especially incentives of interest to youth. Interviewees expressed that they would need multiple meaningful interactions with youth in order to learn about their interests and motivation to participate.

**Type of youth interactions:** Interviewees viewed the type of interaction that they had with youth as either a facilitator or a hinderance to involving youth in the EE of programs targeting youth. Interviewees discussed the use of incremental

and frequent interactions with youth in their evaluations. They explained that with each interaction, youth were more involved in the evaluation. They commented on how the abilities of youth to contribute to the EE increased with each interaction. These interviewees believed that the evolving nature of interactions would facilitate honest and constructive feedback from youth. Interviewees disclosed that youth were more comfortable with the evaluator and more confident in providing opinions each time they interacted. They mentioned looking for opportunities to build relationships with youth through frequent interaction. Interviewees described “put[ting] [themselves] in situations where [they’re] recognized enough” (E5) by “integrating [themselves] into the program” (E8). One interviewee stated the importance of “being part of [youths’] world by being there when youth are in programs, so when [I] go back to talk to youth, [I] have much more credibility” (E1). They discussed how their frequent interaction with youth allowed “young people to feel empowered by someone taking the time to understand their world and ensure the evaluation is relevant to them by being there to check in with them often” (E2). However, other interviewees commented on how their types of interactions with youth in the evaluation were a hinderance, as they were not conducive to youth involvement in EE. They suggested that they could incorporate such interactions if their evaluations were structured in a way that allowed for adaption and adjustment when opportunities for meaningful and authentic interaction seemed possible.

**Evaluation structure:** Interviewees viewed the structure of the evaluation as either a facilitator or a hinderance to involving youth in the EE of programs targeting youth. Interviewees noted that their evaluations evolved as the evaluation progressed and that they were flexible, dynamic, and adaptive to the changing needs and interests of youth. They suggested that this structure would help them engage youth in EE by providing youth with choice in how to participate. As one interviewee said:

With youth, you don’t always know what they are going to say, so you need to provide them with space to think, draw and process, and respond the way that they are comfortable with, even if it’s not a way you would expect or have seen before.

(E7)

Interviewees discussed the importance of “being able and willing to be flexible, engage and adapt as you move forward in the evaluation” (E6), and to “try [new techniques] out and experiment” (E10). They disclosed that being flexible often meant “taking a step back and letting [the youth] do [the evaluation work]” (E6) by “putting tools in the hands of the youth so they can define each evaluation activity” (E4). Interviewees suggested that such “flexibility and space allow [youth] voices to be the most commanding in the room” (E2). They also commented on aligning the evaluation activities with programming to ease the involvement of youth. As one interviewee noted:

When I’m working on an EE and I want to involve youth, a lot of my data collection methods fit with their program. I try as much as possible to make sure it’s similar to

the program they would take anyways, so I wasn't asking them to go above and beyond their program to learn about and collect data.

(E11)

In contrast, different interviewees remarked that a hindrance was their ridged evaluation structure, which was not beneficial to youth involvement in EE. They spoke about how they would need organizational support to be confident in designing an evaluation where the structure adapted to the agency and choices of youth.

**Support from organizations:** Interviewees viewed the support from organizations as either a facilitator or a hindrance to involving youth in the EE of programs targeting youth. Interviewees explained how support from organizations is essential for facilitating youth involvement in EE. They noted that they are including program staff as well as youth advisory groups in preparation efforts to understand how they can best involve youth. These interviewees detailed how stakeholders facilitate their youth involvement efforts by identifying, recruiting, and coordinating youth in EE. As one interviewee said:

Certain roles can't be taken on by the evaluator, they need these additional people on board to do the work related to involving youth. I'd say the organization is in the best position to [involve youth in EE], so you need coaches and leaders on board and able to train.

(E5)

They also commented on how youth-led programming and the youth-development philosophies of some organizations facilitate youth involvement in EE. Interviewees believed that EE is philosophically congruent with a positive youth-development approach. According to interviewees, "when youth are already leading their own development and able to take charge, asking them to be part of our EE and apply those skills is easier and more effective because it's just a natural fit with their program" (E4). They discussed how they leverage existing groups of youth leaders within the organization to actively participate in EEs. Interviewees described how organizations have "pre-existing opportunities for interaction and engagement for youth in the organization that [they] can hook-on to for the evaluation" (E10). As one interviewee explained, "In our last project we tapped into a youth counsel that already existed in the organization and they advised us on our evaluation in incredible ways because this role was already comfortable for them" (E2). However, interviewees also said that regardless of their client's program philosophy, some organizations do not have the resources or mechanisms to assist them in involving youth in EE, which hindered their involvement of youth in EE.

In summary, interviewees who said they involve youth in EE noted that youths' interest and abilities facilitated the involvement of youth in EE, while the age of youth hindered involvement. However, interviewees who said they do not involve youth in EE believed youths' interest and abilities and the age of youth both hindered involvement. Likewise, interviewees who involve youth and those who do not involve youth in EE consider the existence and availability of incentives, the

type of youth interactions, the evaluation structure, and support from organizations as factors that facilitate or hinder the involvement of youth in EE.

## DISCUSSION

According to the continuum presented by [Checkoway and Richards-Schuster \(2003\)](#), which was later revised by [Richards-Schuster and Plachta Elliott \(2019\)](#), evaluators can immerse youth in evaluation as coevaluators by providing them with opportunities to take active roles in the design, implementation, reporting, and use of evaluation findings. Evaluators in this study commented on involving youth in EE as coevaluators. They involved youth across different stages of the evaluation. For example, evaluators commented on involving youth in establishing a mission statement for their program/project, assessing the current state of their program/project, planning program/project goals/benchmarks for the future, identifying strategies to achieve program/project goals, and identifying credible evidence to collect to assess their ability to achieve program/project goals. These activities have been identified by [Fetterman et al. \(2015\)](#) as the three steps of EE. Yet the evaluators in this study also reported using more than just these three steps to involve youth. The other activities represent ways of supporting or repeating the three steps, as well as ways of putting into action the 10 principles that [Fetterman and Wandersman \(2005\)](#) use to define EE and distinguish it from other collaborative evaluation approaches ([Table 4](#)). There appears to be a variation in the types

**Table 4.** Empowerment evaluation principles

Principle	Description
Accountability	Outcomes function within existing policies, standards, measures of accountability
Capacity building	Enhances stakeholders' ability to prepare evaluation and use it to improve programming
Community knowledge	Respects and values community knowledge
Community ownership	Values and facilitates community control
Democratic participation	Open and fair decision-making
Evidence-based strategies	Respects and uses knowledge base of scholars (in conjunction)
Improvement	Build on substantive and relevant issues
Inclusion	All contributions are welcome
Organizational learning	Evidence of use of evaluation to build new practices to inform decision-making, implement program practices, and help organizations learn from experience
Social justice	Evaluation is useful to address social inequalities in society

*Note.* From *Empowerment Evaluation Principles in Practice* by D. M. Fetterman and A. Wandersman (Eds.), 2005, p. 30, New York: Guilford Press. Copyright 2005 by Guilford Press.



of activities where youth are involved and the degree of youth involvement in EE of programs targeting youth. This finding is similar to that of [Miller and Campbell \(2006\)](#), who noted wide variation in how adults were involved in EE.

When asked why they involve youth in EE, evaluators in this study highlighted the unique view and culture of youth, a sentiment described by proponents of youth involvement who argue for the inclusion of youth not only in EE but in evaluation generally (e.g., [Cooksy, 2007](#); [Checkoway & Richards-Shuster, 2003](#); [Fox & Cater, 2011](#); [Samuelson et al., 2013](#); [Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015](#)). In particular, evaluators said they involved youth in the EE of programs targeting youth because youth hold expertise about their own lived experiences. As active participants in the program, youth are viewed as being in the best position to identify and express their particular needs.

Some evaluators in this study disclosed that they used EE to evaluate programs targeting youth, but did not involve youth in the EE. Rather, these evaluators did not view youth involvement in EE to be possible because of concerns about stakeholder interest, limited funds and time, or youth availability. However, the lack of youth involvement in the EE of a program targeting youth raises questions about whether EE is truly EE without such involvement by youth. In such situations, adult stakeholders may be involved in the EE. This difference between what is understood as the EE model and how it is implemented may be due to the hindering factors identified in this study. Future research could explore why this difference exists for some implementations of EE.

Lack of involvement of youth in EE does not necessarily suggest that the benefits of youth involvement (e.g., capacity building, improved critical thinking, inclusion of unique insight, etc.) are lost on some evaluators. Such evaluators may still see the utility of youth involvement in EE because of the value associated with incorporating youth expertise; however, such benefits may be outweighed by the challenges posed by a lack of organizational support and youth interest to facilitate involvement. All three of these factors were listed by evaluators in this study as factors that hinder the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth. Not surprisingly, such factors have also been identified by evaluation scholars ([Chen et al., 2010](#); [Fox & Cater, 2011](#); [Langhout & Fernandez, 2015](#); [Samuelson et al., 2013](#); [Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015](#)) who have studied the involvement of youth in collaborative evaluation approaches in general. These findings suggest that when evaluators involve youth in EE, they are challenged in similar ways and may be able to use and learn from their previous experience involving youth in other forms of collaborative evaluation. Indeed, there may be ways to work around and mitigate these impediments. For example, [Montrosse-Moorhead \(2021\)](#) and [UNICEF \(n.d.\)](#) discuss that when additional time and energy are focused on planning youth involvement and recruiting available youth, the imposition posed by lack of organizational support and youth interest is lessened. While such work may place increased demands on evaluators, in order to involve youth in EE of programs targeting youth, [Miller and Campbell \(2006\)](#) have noted that the involvement of adults in EE also leads to increased demands on evaluators, organizations, staff, participants, and resources and is time intensive. Therefore, the additional work placed on evaluators may be associated with the

use of collaborative evaluation approaches and EE specifically, rather than simply a result of involving youth, in particular.

Certainly funding and staff and organizational resources to support youth involvement in EE would make such work more feasible and meaningful; however, the inclusion of such facilitating factors does not necessarily mean youth involvement will be seamless. For example, the single case study of youth involvement in EE (Langhout & Fernandez, 2015) highlights a dilemma faced by youth. Youth may be supported in their involvement in the evaluation by the evaluand, but the evaluand may be unable to act on the youths' recommendations, resulting in more awareness about problems in their environment, without the ability to solve them. This particular challenge highlights the advantages and disadvantages of placing youth in the coevaluator role on the youth involvement spectrum, in contrast to other stages of youth involvement. In this spot on the continuum, youth are immersed in all stages of the evaluation, yet decision-making control for the evaluation is shared with other stakeholders (e.g., the organization running the program). In their use of concept mapping to involve youth in program evaluation, Dare and Nowicki (2019) discuss the complexities of placing youth in evaluation as coevaluators. While youth in this role may need guidance, training, and support, providing such directed guidance, training, and support to youth may actually inhibit the ability for youth to develop agency and independence from their evaluative work (Dare & Nowicki, 2019).

Similarly, in this study, evaluators noted other hindering factors for the involvement of youth in EE, including youths' abilities, the age of youth, the existence of and availability of incentives for youth, type of youth interactions, and the evaluation structure. While these factors may be viewed as impeding youth involvement in EE, other evaluators in this study also viewed many of these factors as able to facilitate the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth. For example, evaluators expanded on organizational support and staffing as factors that can both hinder and facilitate the involvement of youth in EE. Some evaluators noted that their programs will not or do not have the staff to recruit interested and capable youth and support their involvement in EE, while other evaluators raised the importance of having leadership and support to facilitate youth involvement from staff, organizations, and funders that provide programming to youth. In another example from this study, evaluators identified the need for frequent and flexible interactions, as well as a concern that without the right youth and resources to encourage, sustain, and expand how youth participate, youth may feel their involvement is overwhelming. This demonstrates the complexity of youth involvement in EE and the need to understand the overlapping nature of contributing factors and the need for balance when involving youth in program evaluation activities. Future studies in this area could explore the interactions and complexities between facilitating and hindering factors.

The information in this study can also be used to further support the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth. While evaluators may be apprehensive, even if they have experience involving adults in EE, that apprehension may lessen when one considers the similarities between adult and youth

involvement in EE. Likewise, evaluators who may be experienced in involving youth in evaluation more generally but lack experience with EE in particular can confidently use their existing skill set because of the numerous similarities between the facilitating and hindering factors of EE and youth inclusion in general. For example, previous studies (Checkoway & Richards-Shuster, 2003; Fox & Cater, 2011; Samuelson et al., 2013; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015) on youth involvement in program evaluation have identified a number of contributing factors, including the need to develop an authentic relationship between youth and the evaluator. Similarly, evaluators in this study stressed the importance of providing youth with longitudinal EE interactions and a flexible evaluation structure that allows for such interactions. Youth involvement research (Checkoway & Richards-Shuster, 2003; Fox & Cater, 2011; Samuelson et al., 2013; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015) explains that such interactions facilitate youth involvement by allowing youth to openly share and comfortably participate in the evaluation.

Guidelines have also been used to support a culture of youth inclusion in program evaluation activities (e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Samuelson et al., 2013; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015). These guidelines may include information on the recruitment of youth for inclusion in evaluation activities (e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Samuelson et al., 2013; Zeller-Berkman et al., 2015), strategies for ensuring meaningful involvement during evaluation activities (Bitar, 2019; Fox & Cater, 2011; Montrosse-Moorhead, 2021; Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2019; Roholt & Baizerman, 2018; UNICEF, n.d.), and follow-up actions to ensure use of evaluation findings (Langhout & Fernandez, 2015). While guidelines may take time to develop, Table 5 provides an example of such guidelines as it details the facilitating and hindering factors demonstrated in this study. These guidelines provide direction for the involvement of youth in EE to evaluate programs targeting youth. Funding agencies could use this list to identify the resources needed to properly support youth involvement in EE. The organizations/funders/staff column provides a set of requirements that can be added to grant proposals to demonstrate an understanding of and desire to involve youth in EE. Similarly, the evaluator column could be incorporated by professional evaluator designations like the Canadian Evaluation Society Credentialed Evaluator designation to identify the evaluator competencies associated with youth involvement in EE. This list could be useful for organizations seeking appropriate evaluation expertise and also for evaluators looking to enhance their ability to involve youth in the EE of programs targeting youth.

We can understand the potential limitations of EE and look to other models of involving youth in program evaluation activities to offer alternatives. As there are similarities between the involvement of youth in EE and the use of other approaches, these similarities can be harnessed to advance practice. For example, upon further examination of the EE approach, it appears to assume that the evaluator holds the expertise that will be transferred to young people only through their obedience to the process laid out by the evaluator. This point exemplifies differences on the youth involvement continuum between youth as coevaluators versus youth as leaders of the evaluation. Youth can be evaluation leaders when youth hold complete decision-making power for the evaluation and when adult evaluators act as coaches and facilitators (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003;

**Table 5.** Draft considerations relating to groups using EE to involve youth

Evaluators	Organizations/funders/staff
Obtain basic experience, knowledge of, and training in EE Allow for flexibility and adaptability of EE steps Accept steep learning curve	Request EE and the involvement of youth Communicate willingness to support youth involvement in EE to evaluate Identify and access existing interested and capable youth (e.g., youth advisory committees) Determine staff interest and time
Develop engaging and interactive facilitation skills Spend time on recruiting the right group of older youth (14 to 16 years old) Locate organizations/funders who view youth as capable and prioritize youth development	Understand the benefits and limitations of using an EE approach that involves youth Make incentives available for evaluators to use EE and youth to participate in EE
Build into EE an opportunity to involve youth in evaluation dissemination and use	Use if particular desire to access unique insights and develop evaluation capacity Take EE recommendations from youth seriously and follow through to integrate findings into program

[Montrosse-Moorhead, 2021](#); [Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2019](#); [Richards-Shuster & Plachta Elliott, 2019](#); and [Roholt & Baizerman, 2018](#)). Interviews with evaluators in this study suggest some of these notions about the disinterest, incapability, unpreparedness, and undeveloped nature of youth. In contrast, youth-led evaluation holds different assumptions, viewing youth as citizens now, not modeling them into who they should be ([Moorhead et al., 2019](#); [Roholt & Baizerman, 2018](#)). Transformative participatory evaluation, which may be considered a form of youth-led evaluation, speaks to the importance of evaluation as an emerging process where an evaluator plays a less distinctive role, like an apprenticeship process ([Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2019](#); [Roholt & Baizerman, 2018](#)). This model for evaluation flips power differentials and acknowledges that everyone, including youth, already has important knowledge for the evaluation. In this way, evaluation is viewed as a craft that everyone can participate in through their uniquely occupied position ([Roholt & Baizerman, 2018](#)).

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The current study documented how youth are involved in EE and the circumstances of their involvement. Yet, in this study, evaluators may have provided

socially desirable answers in reporting their responses to the survey and interview questions. Selection bias is also possible in the study. Results represent respondents and interviewees and do not generalize beyond the study sample of selected AEA TIGs. Interview participants were identified through the survey. The authors cannot specify any potential differences between the breath of those who participated in Phase 1 but not Phase 2 because different demographic information was collected in each phase of the research project. Further studies should expand the study sample. In addition, in Phase 2 we did not solely focus on the evaluators' values, attitudes, and behaviors or the specific evaluation contexts that facilitate or hinder the involvement of youth in EE. Future research could more deeply explore these important issues. Moreover, an important limitation is that this study does not capture the perspectives of youth about their involvement in EE. Future studies must include this important perspective in understanding the facilitators and hinderances and strengths and benefits of using EE to involve youth.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that youth are involved in EE beyond the commonly understood three-step approach and that factors like youth ability and evaluation support facilitate youth involvement in EE. It would be inaccurate to assume that to involve youth in meaningful ways is to walk youth through the three steps. There is more needed to create opportunities for youth as evaluation leaders. Instead, evaluators need to think about what they understand to be EE—what it involves and doesn't—and possibly put aside their concerns for specific evaluation approaches and think more about acting out the full expression of the continuum of youth involvement in program evaluation. Due to the similarities found in this study with existing literature, evaluators can also look to their experiences involving adults in EE and involving youth in program evaluation activities, in general, for guidance on involving youth in EE. Evaluation scholars can discuss single concerns about youth ability and evaluation resources, but the complexities of these factors and how they overlap with one another are evident when we try to include youth in evaluation practice. By questioning, challenging, and documenting our involvement of youth in evaluation, we continue to build our knowledge about how to involve youth in program evaluation. Through this process, evaluators and scholars continually build new and more profitable descriptions of themselves and their environment. While this change may not be fast or substantial, evaluation practice may still be altered in incremental and progressive ways merely as a result of evaluation scholars studying it (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). And that is how we move evaluation practice along the continuum of youth involvement!

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## APPENDIX

**Table A1.** Table of specifications for Phase 1 survey

Research questions	Dimension	Corresponding survey item numbers
To what extent do evaluators report involving youth in EE of programs targeting youth?	Nature of youth involvement in EE conducted to evaluate programs targeting youth	Questions 14–17 and 20

**Table A2.** Specifications for Part 1 Phase 2 interview guides

Research questions	Dimension	Corresponding interview questions
What factor(s) do evaluators perceive as facilitating and hindering the involvement of youth in EE of programs targeting youth?	Context	Questions 1–3
	Stakeholder characteristics	Questions 4–5
	Organization characteristics	Questions 6–7
	Evaluator characteristics	Questions 8–9
	Evaluation resources	Questions 10–11
	External factors	Question 12–13
	Other factors	Question 14–16