

For Youth by Youth

Engaging Adolescents as Evaluators of the Growing Up GREAT! Project

I. WHY ADOLESCENT-LED EVALUATION?

Evaluators of projects reaching children and adolescents often limit the role of young people to respondents. But what about engaging young people as team members of the evaluation itself? In the past decades, the idea that young people should participate in decisions that affect them has moved from broader policy work to include program and service evaluation. In many countries, positive youth development (PYD) approaches guide working with young people to build on youths' strengths and provide supports and opportunities that help them achieve goals and transition to adulthood in a productive, healthy manner. PYD efforts have extended to program evaluation, and organizations in global health and beyond are increasingly promoting the meaningful participation of young people in evaluation and research. Including young people as program evaluators and researchers can yield more substantive data (youth respondents are more honest with their evaluator-peers); increase the validity of findings (young people's analytical perspectives can be different than adults, leading to a broader range of findings), and improve the use of findings (creates adult and youth buy-in to improve programs (Ortiz, 2018; World Health Organization, 2020; Powers and Tiffany 2006). However, to date, these arguments and evidence of the impact of youth-led efforts have not significantly changed the role of young people in evaluation (Blakeslee and Walker, 2018; Richards-Schuster and Elliott, 2019).

The Passages Project, with its focus on young people, explored engaging youth in evaluation as part of positive youth development. For two Passages partners, Save the Children, with its organizational mandate of meaningful adolescent



Very young adolescent evaluator interviewing a Growing Up GREAT! club member.

Meaningful Youth Engagement is a "mutually respectful partnership between youth and adults whereby power is shared, respective contributions are valued, and young people's ideas, perspectives, skills, and strengths are integrated into... programs... that affect their lives and their communities...

(YouthPower, <https://www.youthpower.org/youth-engagement-guide>).

engagement in all aspects of programming, and Georgetown University's Institute for Reproductive Health with its interest in furthering adolescent-led research and evaluation efforts, the pathway was clear. While evaluation teams often include older adolescents and youth, Growing Up GREAT! decided to engage and support very young adolescents (VYAs aged 12-16 years) as evaluators of their program. This decision led to two adolescent-adult participatory evaluations in 2018 and 2021. This brief shares highlights and lessons of our evaluation journey to meaningfully engage VYAs in evaluating their programs.

2. WHAT WAS THE UTILITY OF THE GROWING UP GREAT EVALUATIONS?

Growing Up GREAT!, implemented in urban Kinshasa, DRC, is a multi-level intervention for very young adolescent girls and boys to build gender-equitable awareness, agency, and actions. At the same time, Growing Up GREAT! activities were designed to sensitize adults in the lives of VYAs — parents and carers, teachers, and local health providers — to engage them in reflections on gender equality, and promote

more substantive adult-child communication and other supports to adolescents navigating the rapid physical, emotional, cognitive changes and social expectations during puberty. Through guided activities using gender-transformative materials, each group explores reproductive health and well-being, gender-based violence, and gender equality. Teachers and providers also receive training in adolescent-friendly sexuality education and counseling approaches. See <https://irh.org/interventions/growing-up-great/>.

The participatory youth evaluation frame complements the Global Early Adolescent Study (GEAS), which evaluated the impact of Growing Up GREAT! The quantitative multi-country research on gender socialization included a site in Kinshasa, which partly assessed Growing Up GREAT's impact. Still, it did not capture all of the program's impact due to its focused scope. While GEAS followed a cohort of VYAs to identify changes over five years, Growing Up GREAT! also included significant adults in VYA lives. The participatory, qualitative approach (see Evaluation Parameters table) could

triangulate findings of VYAs and adults and better illuminate why and how Growing Up GREAT! was influencing change to create a supportive gender-egalitarian environment that favors girls and boys equally in the home, school, and health services settings.

In other words, Passages' participatory youth evaluation would provide crucial complementary information for program improvement. It was not merely a 'nice to engage young people' effort but a systematic inquiry by adolescents with adult support in how well their program worked.

3. TO WHAT EXTENT WERE THE EVALUATIONS ADOLESCENT-LED?

The table, Adolescent engagement and learnings from the participatory youth evaluations, summarizes the steps of the evaluation process in 2018 and 2021 with learning highlights.

EVALUATION PARAMETERS		
	2018	2021
TEAM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 6 VYA evaluators (12-14 yrs) • 6 young adult mentors • 1 adult researcher team lead 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 adolescent evaluators (13-16 yrs) • 5 young adult mentors • 1 young adult team lead from Save's MEAL Unit
RESPONDENTS	<p>N=60, all participating 1+ yrs in Growing Up GREAT!</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 VYAs in after-school clubs • 12 VYAs in community clubs • 24 Parents/caregivers of VYAs • 12 Teachers 	<p>N=110, all participating 2+ yrs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 80 VYAs in community clubs • 30 Parents/caregivers of VYAs
QUESTIONS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the most significant changes program participants have experienced since participating in Growing Up GREAT! In general, and in how VYAs communicate with peers, family, and teachers on puberty, body literacy, and healthy relationships? 2. How have parents/caregivers changed due to their and their children's participation in Growing Up GREAT!? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What are the most significant changes that VYAs and their parents have experienced due to participating in Growing Up GREAT!? 2. In which spaces are changes most pronounced -internal self, peers, home, and community? 3. What can we say about gender-egalitarian changes (attitudes, behaviors) within and between generations?
METHODS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured interviews • 'Most Significant Change' story collection/narration • Observations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi-structured interviews • Draw-and-Tell Flower Methodology (visual adaptation of Most-Significant Change)

This brief focuses on the evaluation process that engaged young evaluators. See Results of the 2018 evaluation here: <https://irh.org/resource-library/gug-wave-1-and-2-impact-brief/> and the 2021 evaluation here: <https://irh.org/resource-library/les-tres-jeunes-adolescents-et-leurs-parents-comment-bien-grandir-les-a-t-il-touche/>



One of the evaluators introducing himself during the orientation training.



Youth evaluators, supported by mentors, doing practice interviews with college students.

Each evaluation reflected different VYA and Youth engagement levels, depending on evaluation questions and available resources. For example, the 2018 evaluation was more VYA-led across the evaluation steps than the 2021 evaluation that principally engaged adolescents in data collection and analysis. Both evaluations included mentors, experienced youth researchers paired with VYA evaluators. The 2018 evaluation contracted an adult researcher from the Kinshasa School of Public Health as the team lead. The 2021 evaluation engaged an internal team lead, a young person in the Monitoring and Evaluation And Learning (MEAL) Unit at Save the Children, who supported Growing Up GREAT!

VYAs, at their young age, are still developing analytic capacity, which implies differing possibilities to take on some evaluation tasks. For example, the evaluation used the 'Most Significant Change' technique, which collects stories of significant change or impact stories from participants to help assess a projects' performance. It was not realistic to ask VYAs to take field notes of participant stories because of their limited capacities to take notes. Instead, VYA evaluators worked with their mentors to write the interview as a narrative story for later analysis. Data analysis was also adjusted. VYAs in 2018 did a preliminary analysis of the stories of the most significant change offered by respondents, followed by a second, more nuanced analysis by the adult researcher to deepen the findings.

Also, some methods worked better to engage adolescent evaluators. Interviews were easier for younger adolescents to manage compared to focus group discussions. Observations of adolescent interactions to document how gender roles played out in school and community settings were planned in 2018 did not work well; the collected information was inadequate, and perhaps the task was not concrete enough. In retrospect, asking VYA evaluators to use photo-voice — another

qualitative method used in community-based participatory research that asks evaluators or participants to take photos that document and reflect reality — may have worked better.

4. WHAT ADULT EVALUATORS LEARNED ABOUT ENGAGING YOUNGER ADOLESCENTS IN YOUTH PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

Adult evaluators on the team reflected on the experiences of the two evaluation studies. The findings below show a focus on planning, ensuring the quality of the evaluation process, and creating conditions for meaningful youth engagement of very young adolescent evaluators.

- ***Engaging younger adolescents 12-14 years as part of an evaluation team is possible.*** Although some adults were initially unsure, by the end of the 2018 evaluation (and later reaffirmed in 2021) it was clear to adults that VYAs can be engaged meaningfully in all phases of an evaluation and bring new perspectives. Thoughtful preparation will allow their full participation while also recognizing that VYAs are limited to some extent by still-developing analytical capacities.
- ***Build audacious attitudes and good technical skills of young people as evaluators.*** VYAs are not used to taking center stage, and it's crucial to build their confidence as evaluation 'explorers' and 'journalists' who have the right to ask questions. With confidence and experience, younger adolescent girls and boys develop technical skills and quality performance.

ADOLESCENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNINGS FROM THE PARTICIPATORY EVALUATIONS IN 2018 AND 2021

EVAL STEP	2018	2021	COOL LEARNING
QUESTION DEVELOPMENT	VYA evaluators prioritized questions from a list of questions they brainstormed	Adult evaluators prioritized questions based on GEAS findings in areas that showed fewer VYA improvements	2018 - VYAs generated their topics of interest to explore in the evaluation and voted on the top ones to use. They owned the evaluation from the start! Adults at Save the Children, partner CBOs, and IRH were amazed at how well the VYAs contributed their ideas throughout the workshop and demonstrated confidence and skills during data collection practice. One CBO staff person said he would never see VYAs the same way again.
EVALUATION PLANNING	Tools and approaches determined by IRH and SCI staff (adults) Day to day planning led by a KSPH researcher (an adult)	Tools and procedures determined by IRH and SCI staff (mix of adults-young people) Day to day planning led by SCI MEAL officer (herself a youth)	2018 - SCI proposed adding youth mentors to support VYAs. Mentors as experienced researchers were crucial to helping VYAs improve their research skills and ensure their safety in community settings. The VYAs looked up to mentors as their coaches and role models. Youth mentors were inspired by the idea of helping younger adolescents build skills and take on evaluation tasks.
TRAINING & TOOL PRETESTING	Saturday workshops for VYAs and mentors facilitated by KSPH and IRH and occurred in community centers.	SCI with mentor support facilitated Saturday workshops for VYAs.	2018 – To build skills, evaluators practiced interviewing actual parents, teachers, and VYA club members at the community center and then in real-life interview settings. Adults who participated in the pretesting of tools were struck by the maturity of VYAs and their questions. One parent giving feedback said that she liked being asked these questions by VYAs – they were not customarily discussed - and it changed her mind about roles that VYAs can play.
DATA COLLECTION	Organized on weekends, mentors provided technical support, ensured the safety of VYAs, and supported VYAs in data collection.	Due to Covid-19, respondents met in one place, which allowed social distancing and multiple interviews. Separate weekend meetings were held for young people and adult respondents.	2018 - The use of digital recorders was a vital tool for VYAs, who did not have strong field note-taking skills. It also gave them a 'cool' factor with interviewees. 2021 – The Most Significant Change method was adapted to become a flower visual drawn by respondents. Each petal represented an area of significant change and yielded better responses than verbal story-telling. It also involved a participatory interview approach which VYAs and mentors needed to manage. Teams supported individuals drawing and explaining changes.
DATA ANALYSIS	The KSPH researcher-led weekend data workshops. VYAs and mentors read narratives and analyzed them to identify key findings.	Similar weekend data analysis parties occurred, except analysis was led by the SCI MEAL Officer. This time data were organized by 'petal' and sex and printed out for examination.	2021 - The evaluation team shared their preliminary findings with the Youth Advisory Council to help interpret the results, engaging another set of young people in evaluation activities and interpreting findings.
SHARING FINDINGS	VYA members of the evaluation team co-presented with adults to different groups at SCI, the Ministry of Health, other events using slide decks to share findings.	VYA members presented findings to Growing Up GREAT's Youth Advisory Committee. They are planning community sharing events and a presentation at ICPF.	2018 - SCI brought to International Conference on FP (ICFP) in Kigali a VYA Evaluator and his Dad to talk about the evaluation process and results. A huge opportunity for the adolescent evaluation team to share the process of youth engagement in evaluation with a delighted, sometimes incredulous audience of youth and adult conference-goers!



Evaluation team during workshop to analyse stories of most significant change.

- ***Be creative yet flexible in the evaluation approach.***

Think about evaluation manageability from the VYA perspective for each evaluation step and what tasks might need adjustment for meaningful youth engagement in planning, training, data collection analysis, and dissemination. For example, training workshops were no longer than one-half day with breaks scheduled for every 45 minutes.

- ***Plan how to manage adultism on evaluation teams when adults want to ‘power over’ young people as evaluators.***

Adultism can occur within adult-adolescent evaluation teams, with adults wanting to lead instead of consciously and systematically giving young evaluators the space to express their ideas and contribute to the process. Some adults may need to be gently reminded to act differently if they show ‘power over’ attitudes towards young people. Giving young people space yields important benefits. The adult evaluators significantly improved the evaluation tools, for example, by giving VYA evaluators the opportunity and shared responsibility to review and change them to be understandable by their peers.

- ***Build-in additional time to allow young people to engage fully.***

Participatory research, by definition, involves new researcher-stakeholder collaborations and takes more time than research entirely conducted by professionals. Adolescent-led research may take longer because of the need for flexibility to organize workshops and data collection at times convenient to young people and prioritize school. The evaluation essentially occurred on weekends when young evaluators were available.



VYA evaluators presenting findings of the evaluation at the Save the Children office.

5. WHAT ADOLESCENT EVALUATORS AND YOUTH MENTORS HAVE LEARNED AS EVALUATORS OF GROWING UP GREAT

In 2021, the evaluation team conducted an after-action review of the evaluation. The following reflections on being an evaluator as a young person and the spillover effects on their lives come from a focus group discussion with adolescent evaluators and youth mentors.

- ***As adolescent evaluators, take the time to learn from children and adolescents their opinions ‘because they are teaching us when we listen attentively.’***

All agreed to the critical importance of listening to respondents and giving them the space and respect to express their ideas. This is also the value of evaluation using participatory, qualitative methods.

- ***For adult evaluators, ‘give the best of yourself; you have deep knowledge as adults that we adolescents don’t have.’***

Adolescent evaluators emphasized that adults must take the time to listen to VYA evaluators and ‘help us to dig deeper into understanding what we are doing.’ As a first evaluation experience, many were hesitant about what they were doing. Suggestions for adults: Be patient; during training workshops, let us finish our thoughts as we answer questions, or our ideas will flee. Be kind; don’t talk to us like you’re a policeman. Be happy and friendly.

- ***Adolescent evaluators and mentors build new and valued technical skills that improve evaluation quality.***

Adolescent evaluators said they had mastered critical evaluation skills, including confidence in interviewing others, being patient, paying attention, and

actively listening to interviewees. They take the time to go deeper in reflections with a respondent. They know how to put a respondent at ease, to show empathy that encourages particularly timid respondents to share their thoughts. Youth Mentors reflected how working with adolescent evaluators deepened their technical skills and led to new teaching and coaching skills that they had not developed when they were adolescent-researchers.

- **Being an adolescent evaluator creates a new awareness of civic leadership responsibilities to represent a diversity of voices.** The 2021 VYA evaluators were members of the Growing Up GREAT Youth Advisory Council with inherent leadership roles. Gathering information, adolescent evaluators (and mentors) learned more about how VYAs and parents think, feel, and act. For many, it has profoundly changed their way of seeing who VYAs are and the lives they are living. They are now more explicit on the vital role of representing the diversity of adolescent perspectives.
- **Evaluation makes adolescent evaluators more rounded and resilient people.** Doing an evaluation led to learning how to listen to VYAs and adults and



2018 evaluation team.

value others' arguments and opinions, not just your own. Evaluation teaches you never to assume you know what a person is thinking without ever talking to them. Evaluators have also (humbly) learned that they often share the same concerns as those they interviewed. The act of listening to others can offer new solutions and ways to think about and confront personal issues.

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