

The youth transformative participatory evaluator education and training approach: The EvalYouth experience

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Abstract

In the face of unprecedented and ever-changing challenges at the local, national, and global levels, evaluation must change too. Our old ways no longer serve us or the field's social, economic, political, and humanitarian betterment aims. Taking these aims seriously means much must change, including how we educate and train. In this article, we lay out a vision for what must happen within evaluator education and training and examples of how a transformative frame can be successfully integrated. With the great challenges our countries and societies face, we revisit three fundamental questions: what do evaluator education and training 'done well' mean? What should such education and training look like? Who should lead it?

INTRODUCTION

Hundreds of millions worldwide live in extreme poverty; socio-economic inequalities are on the rise; democracy is under threat at a magnitude not seen since the 1930s; the Covid-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc, and the scale and effects of the environmental crises are unprecedented. With such global challenges and other country and society-specific concerns, we contend that evaluation is vital. Providing evidence to address local, national, and global challenges is crucial. For this to happen, evaluator education and training also need to evolve. How we educate and train evaluators, especially young and emerging evaluators (YEEs), needs to be revolutionary and transformative to prepare evaluators to face such enormous, evolving challenges.

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Evaluation's history includes the long arc of a transformative frame in practice, scholarly writing, and ethical guidelines. Of note is that much of this has focused on *evaluation* education, meaning the practice of evaluation itself, including capacity-strengthening efforts. Except for a few exceptions, serious efforts focused on *evaluator* education and training are rare, and evaluator education with a transformative frame is rarer (Boyce, 2021; Boyce & Chouinard, 2017; Gullickson et al., 2019).

In this article, we argue that an evaluator education and training approach focused on youth transformative participatory approaches is needed on a much grander scale to adequately revolutionize and transform practice to address local, national, and global challenges. In the first section, we take head on the question of the purpose of evaluator education and training. Here we lay out the tenets of the approach for which we are advocating. Next, we offer a case example of a youth transformative participatory evaluator education and training approach with EvalYouth Global Network's work and contrast it with existing forms of education and training to illuminate what is unique about the EvalYouth case. In the final section, we lay out how the approach we advocate for—and examples from EvalYouth—connect to more extensive conversations on decolonization, democratization, indigenization, equity, and social justice in evaluation.

THE YOUTH TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATORY EVALUATOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING APPROACH

The youth transformative participatory evaluator education and training approach we describe and advocate for in this article is inextricably tied to two fundamental ideas: (1) *Youth-Participatory Evaluation approach* and (2) the *Youth Transformative Participatory approach*. While including a complete description of both approaches is not possible here, a summary of each approach follows.

The **Youth-Participatory Evaluation (YPE)** approach is essentially the practice of involving young people¹ in conducting evaluations (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). It entails engaging young people in all phases of the evaluation process (not just the data collection phase) and various roles (not merely as informants) (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2019). YPE seeks to empower young people by incorporating their diverse perspectives and lived experiences in evaluation in authentic ways, where evaluation is done *with* or *by* youth rather than *on* or *to* them (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2019, p. 40). This orientation departs from the *business-as-usual* approach, in which young people serve primarily as data sources (Heath & Moreau, 2022).

The **Youth Transformative Participatory (YTP)** approach—rooted in the EvalYouth experience and put forward by EvalYouth leaders, members, and volunteers—focuses specifically on YEEs (ages 18–35). It is defined as “the process of involving, working with, and following the lead of young people where their cultural contexts, lived experiences, and personal values guide action” (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., in press, p. 6). The YTP approach is grounded in four guiding principles (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., pp. 6–7):

1. Practical knowledge is as valid and useful as technical and scientific knowledge.
2. Power and decision-making are context-bound and ebb and flow between a space where experienced and young evaluators initiate work.
3. Deliberation is the central mode of education and decision-making processes; and

¹ There is no universal definition of “young people” globally. In this article, “young people” and “youth” refer to individuals aged 10 to 35 and thus, includes adolescents, youth, and YEEs (see, Montrosse-Moorhead, Bitar, Arévalo Gross, & Rishko-Porcescu, 2019; UNICEF 2018; WHO, n.d.).

4. Activism is a fundamental means to realizing transformative social change.

Like YPE, the YTP approach strives to include and involve young people (mainly YEEs in the case of YTP) in all activities and responsibilities of the evaluative inquiry. However, unlike YPE, YTP requires that YEEs are in the driver's seat. This youth leadership is exercised with a "nothing about us without us" frame², considering what Head (2011) describes as the ethical, effectiveness, and youth development rationales for consequential youth empowerment and participation. The YTP approach also considers intersectional power and marginalization aspects. For example, it includes youth from various socio-economic, ethnic, religious, cultural, geographical, gender, and disability backgrounds, rather than only the most advantaged YEEs. Thus, it is vital for evaluators who use the YTP approach to be cognizant of who is included and who is not, why, and what can be done about it. Authentic participation, equity, social justice, empowerment, and emancipation are core values of the YTP approach, as it seeks to empower those oppressed by dominant groups.

The YTP approach has roots in the writing of critical theorists (e.g., Freire, 2000; Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997; Marx & Engels, 1848) and transformative evaluation theorists (e.g., Mertens, 2009; Mertens & Wilson, 2018). Like other transformative approaches, the YTP approach views the purpose of evaluation as taking an active role in co-producing knowledge and working toward empowerment, emancipation, equity, and social justice rather than merely interpreting truth or reality. The axiological assumptions and underpinnings of the YTP approach strongly align with other approaches under the transformative paradigm and their embedded values, namely respect for culture, promotion of social justice, addressing inequities, furthering human rights, reciprocity, and recognition of community strengths and resilience (see, Mertens & Wilson, 2018, p. 160).

The youth transformative participatory evaluator education and training approach we propose in this article extends the YTP approach to evaluator teaching and learning. It moves away from technocratic and sociocultural frameworks dominant in evaluator education (Montrosse-Moorhead et al., 2021). Instead, it centers evaluator education and training on decolonizing and democratizing knowledge and skill-sharing in the critical, radical processes of learning and unlearning. When the axiological underpinnings, values, and principles of the YTP approach are taken into account, evaluator education and training become less about the individual evaluator's acquisition of knowledge and skills through teaching and learning. Rather, education and training become more about how individuals critically engage with these learning (and unlearning) processes, collaborate with others to co-produce and co-design, contextualize reality, and apply the knowledge, skills, and understanding in real life and complex situations.

HOW EVALYOUTH USES THE YOUTH TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATORY EVALUATOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING APPROACH

Beyond university-based degrees, evaluators have two primary pathways for education and training: (1) The education avenue, which we define as the pathway characterized by receiving systematic evaluation instruction at a college or university, leads to evaluation certificates or degrees. These certificates and degrees may or may not involve ongoing mentoring by seasoned evaluators. (2) The other pathway, the training avenue, includes

² This frame's origins can be traced back to and is included in the 1505 Polish Act that transformed the country from a monarchy to a democracy. In the US, it first came into usage with the publishing of James I. Charlton's (1998) book, *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*. As Charlton notes in the book, he first heard the phrase in South Africa from Michael Masutha and William Rowland, two leaders of the Disabled People South Africa movement.

participating in workshops, short courses, webinars, and other short-duration experiences. Training does not include ongoing mentoring. Regardless of which pathway one takes or may find themselves in, all of the decisions on the content, modes of instruction, and other aspects are made by those in power, such as the universities, training institutes, or Voluntary Organizations for Professional Evaluation (VOPEs) that are offering education and training opportunities. None actively involve those they aim to serve or YEEs in any part of the process, from initial development through implementation; rather, they are positioned as consumers of the program or training. EvalYouth's approach differs from this business-as-usual modality. In the following text, we highlight what is different about EvalYouth's approach to education and training, from its initial conception through implementation.

EvalYouth's goal of placing YEEs at the center of evaluation has been built on a youth transformative participatory evaluator education and training approach (EvalYouth, 2016). It is the only evaluator education and training opportunity to ground its efforts in a transformative youth lens. EvalPartners—of which EvalYouth is part—originally conceived the idea of a youth-led global network supporting YEEs to ensure that capacity-building and strengthening efforts are aligned with and responsive to the challenges newcomers face in the evaluation community. The EvalYouth Global Network was launched in 2015 in Kathmandu, Nepal, at the Second Global Evaluation Forum by a group of 23 YEEs from various countries and regions who set the priorities for the global network (EvalYouth, 2016). The very nature of the launch and priority setting of the network was built on the core principles of inclusiveness, participation, empowerment, equity, and social justice, which provided a strong foundation for a transformative network. Since then, the network has facilitated capacity-strengthening activities for thousands of YEEs and YEE leaders across the globe. It championed the youth movement in evaluation and connected thousands of YEEs via learning and training events, relying primarily on co-design within the network, its task forces, national and regional chapters, and with other key actors. By “co” we mean that it was designed by a team of YEEs across the globe, based on the expressed needs of YEEs internationally. There was no part of the process that did not directly involve multiple and global perspectives of YEEs.

EvalYouth has expanded to include seven regional and over 25 national chapters. This directly resulted from training and leadership experience gained by YEEs while volunteering for the network activities. In addition, the network served as a catalyst encouraging the launch of other networks through experience sharing with peers at the regional and national levels. For example, YEEs from different regions share their experiences in leadership in VOPE governance and committees through a series of webinars as part of Task Force I of EvalYouth. In addition, EvalYouth regional chapters conduct their activities in coordination with the global network. For instance, the Eastern Europe and Central Asia chapter runs its mentorship program. Several other regional chapters organize annual evaluation summer and winter schools for YEEs. EvalYouth, including its regional and national chapters, intentionally aims to mainstream this collaborative and transformative approach, making it markedly different from the business-as-usual approach. The leadership of EvalYouth comprises volunteers from across the globe who represent all regions in the Global South and Global North. Members and volunteers rise to leadership within an environment built on equity-focused and culturally-responsive values and practices. Most EvalYouth volunteers and YEE leaders originate from the Global South or minority groups in the Global North (Bitar, 2019).

Equity is one of the core fundamental principles when designing and implementing programs and activities in EvalYouth (Bitar, 2021). While business-as-usual education and training efforts include equity as one of several principles, none have used it as *the* guiding

principle upon which all other principles are centered. For example, translating all learning materials of the EvalYouth's Annual Virtual Conference (EY-AVC) and Global Mentorship Program (EY-GMP) into multiple languages reinforces inclusivity. It encourages diversity of YEE participation from around the globe. A dedicated team of YEEs designed the EY-GMP. A professional evaluator was contracted to co-create and co-design mentoring blueprints and learning modules with EvalYouth leaders and YEE volunteers. The program's pilot phase comprised a global YEE needs assessment followed by dissemination of the findings and advocacy that informed the development of a concept note and proposal design process. Equity-based selection criteria were vital in the selection of applicants. YEE learning was encouraged through unstructured bilateral sessions between mentors and mentees with essential action items to guide YEE professional development and ensure met needs. To date, four phases of the mentorship program have been implemented with over 450 mentees and mentors from all regions across the globe. EvalYouth volunteers implement the program with a part-time YEE administrative consultant supporting coordination. This process has resulted in profound learning experiences for task force volunteers and members and uses a formative learning process to document and record lessons learned on an ongoing basis. External evaluations of the mentoring program—conducted by YEEs from outside of EvalYouth—have consistently illustrated a pre-post improvement in YEE knowledge and skills.

EvalYouth provides a platform for YEEs to collectively deliberate, organize, facilitate, chair, and run mentoring programs, training sessions, webinars, and conferences. This is unlike any other approach to education and training, and very different from business-as-usual approaches. Being part of EvalYouth's activities, YEEs gain the confidence to articulate their needs and apply their knowledge and skills as volunteers. This allows YEEs to lead teaching and learning activities, not merely attend them. EvalYouth normalized that there is something to learn from YEEs from across the globe in multiple languages. In doing so, it demonstrated to the world the capacity of YEEs, showcasing their distinct and much-needed knowledge, skills, energy, and understanding of the world in which we live (Hoosen & Bennani, 2020).

DECOLONIZATION AND DEMOCRATIZATION OF EVALUATOR EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Connecting the theoretical conception of the youth transformative participatory evaluator education and training approach to other approaches addressing decolonization, democratization, equity, and social justice discussions in evaluation is crucial. EvalYouth is one example of a transformative youth-led network underpinned by the principle of advocating for equitable YEE inclusion and involvement. But, when speaking about *transformative* youth participatory evaluator education and training, there is a need to couch its conception within the debate of decolonizing evaluation, which has been primarily dominant in the African continent and present in other regions in the Global South (see Dighe, this volume). This debate emerged along with and was enriched by the rise of other relevant approaches, most notably culturally-responsive, indigenous, and Made-In-Africa evaluation approaches (see, for example, Chilisa & Mertens, 2021; Chilisa et al., 2016; Mapitsa et al., 2019; Frehiwot, 2019; Omosa et al., 2021; Streck & Holiday, 2015; Johnston-Goodstar, 2012), responding to the clear dominance of Western-influenced and developed evaluation approaches and donor-centered evaluation in Africa and other parts of the Global South.

Focusing on the African context, for example, where many EvalYouth volunteers, members, and leaders come from—and where EvalYouth has strong roots—Frehiwot (2019) argues that decolonizing evaluation is *needed* so that African evaluators reclaim their voice, which ought to be “a true reflection of African idiosyncrasy and not just a carbon copy of evaluation practices imported to Africa” (p. 26). Frehiwot (2019, pp. 24–26) also identifies four key components of decolonizing evaluation, including (1) deconstruction and reconstruction, (2) self-determination and social justice, (3) acknowledging indigenous knowledge, and (4) internationalization of indigenous experiences. These components encompass an inherent need for bringing about equity and social justice through a revolutionary approach to documenting indigenous knowledge on evaluation from theories, approaches, methodologies, and disseminating evaluation results. Additionally, the ‘Made-in-Africa’ evaluation approach, as argued by Chilisa et al. (2016), makes it necessary to “debate the assumptions about the nature of reality (ontology), knowledge (epistemology), and values (axiology) that inform evaluation inquiry and practice” (p. 314). This would allow for a deconstruction of existing methodologies and methods that instill Western views and coloniality of knowledge and make way to reinvest in indigenous methodologies and approaches that consider more participatory evaluation practices premised on the notions of equity and social justice.

Decolonizing knowledge and the indigenization of evaluation in African and other Global South countries based on inclusivity, equity, and social justice (Chilisa et al., 2016; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) is like the youth transformative participatory evaluation approach to evaluator education and training. Decolonizing evaluation requires re-thinking and re-shaping evaluation education. Considering the current youth transformative participatory evaluator education and training approach, with the practical example of EvalYouth, it is worth highlighting the strong potential of the role YEEs could play in decolonizing and indigenizing evaluation in Africa and other regions.

YEEs can challenge current approaches and methodological practices, which Thomas and Madison (2010) argue are crucial to making evaluators more conscious of equity and social justice issues. Embedding equity and social justice as values and foci in evaluator education and training would inspire evaluation learners to “challenge the status quo, to care about the interests of the disadvantaged, and to uncover weaknesses within the system that contribute to inequalities within society” (Thomas & Madison, 2010, p. 571). This is a possible avenue to deconstruct dominant Western approaches to evaluation and offer an opportunity to reconstruct new approaches that are cognizant of relevant and contextualized indigenous methods and ways of thinking. An example of such approaches is participatory engagement that builds on existing, traditional community structures to harvest diverse community perspectives or utilize citizen-based monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. A case in point is Uganda Baraza’s approach by which citizens monitor government progress on developmental outcomes and the use of public funds and resources. (Watera, 2019).

The business-as-usual evaluator education and training uses Western-developed and oriented evaluation approaches. On the contrary, EvalYouth has served as an international, intercultural example of how the view of youth can be integral to shaping evaluator capacity strengthening and evaluator education and training using a transformative, participatory approach. EvalYouth, as a network in its design, mandate, and structure, has directly (and indirectly) instilled in YEEs a consciousness of addressing social inequities and injustices. Using the youth transformative participatory evaluator education and training approach is one way in which the core values of equity, social justice, inclusion, and empowerment can shape localized evaluation—and education and training approaches—that replace dominant Western and business-as-usual approaches. YEEs, as critical actors

in the process of decolonizing and democratizing evaluation, especially in designing and implementing evaluation capacity-strengthening approaches, have much to offer using this transformative approach.

CONCLUSION

In the face of unprecedented and ever-changing challenges, evaluation must change too. Our old ways no longer serve us or the field's social, economic, political, and humanitarian betterment aims. Taking these aims seriously means much must change, including how we educate and train. In this article, we laid out a vision for what must happen within training and education and examples of how a transformative frame can be successfully co-created, integrated, and used by a committed and dedicated cadre of YEEs from all around the globe, guided by the principles, values, and ethics of the youth transformative participatory approach. We note, however, that this is just the start. The youth transformative participatory approach to teaching and learning in evaluation will be shaped and reshaped in the future, depending on the context. For now, what is most needed is for the approach to be mainstreamed and embraced by evaluation educators and trainers, the evaluation community, and other relevant actors. We now challenge these groups to take up the hard work necessary to re-frame the evaluator education and training system with equity, social justice, decolonization, and democratization as centerpieces.

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Qudratullah Jahid is an evaluator with over a decade of work experience with bilateral and multilateral development organizations in the Asia Pacific region. He is Vice President of the Asia Pacific Evaluation Association (APEA). Qudratullah is a former member of EvalYouth Management Group, Co-Founder of the Afghan Evaluation Society, and Co-Founder of EvalYouth Asia. He is a Fulbright program alumnus receiving a master's in International Development and Social Change from Clark University in Massachusetts, United States. His expertise includes mixed methods evaluations, monitoring and evaluation frameworks, evaluation capacity building, and third-party monitoring. One of his crucial volunteer contributions has been building the capacity of young evaluation professionals, including training and mentoring programs for hundreds of young and emerging evaluators through EvalYouth and the Afghan Evaluation Society.