

From Respondents to Evaluation Practitioners

Reflection on Youth Leadership Initiative's Youth Participatory Evaluation (YPE) Workshop and Practice Guide

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Engaging young people is at the heart of renewing the field of evaluation. Through engagement with the practice of youth participatory evaluation (YPE), the Wilder Foundation’s Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) has worked to integrate and elevate youth voice in not just the implementation of program activities, but in aspects of continuous quality improvement as well.

YLI is grounded in the belief that youth have tremendous skills and talents, invaluable and unique perspectives, and passion and commitment – all of which have the potential to benefit our community. Stemming from this core belief that young people are not problems but part of the solution, YLI provides young people with support and leadership opportunities that are comprehensive, positive, participatory, and encourage youth involvement in the community. YLI’s strengths-based approach involves youth in decision-making at all levels of the program and ensures success by building strong, respectful, and committed relationships with youth. Grounded in these values, YLI has engaged their youth in YPE practices since 2013. YPE has become a tool of racial and evaluation justice; in particular, youth of color and immigrant youth are centered as experts of their own experience and respected as evaluators in their own right.

In 2017-18, youth and program staff in YLI worked side-by-side with Wilder Research staff to create the Youth Participatory Evaluation Practice Guide, which was devised to help youth development programs develop their own practice-centered YPE approaches. In 2018-19, YLI launched its first formal immersive workshop of YPE using the Practice Guide. YLI worked with Wilder Research to gather feedback from YLI’s youth mentors and program staff from another youth development organization who participated in the workshop sessions. We also gathered feedback from youth development leaders, program practitioners, and funders who are familiar with YLI about potential use and value of the YPE Practice Guide. More information on the data collection methods is presented later in this summary. YLI plans to use the information to improve their YPE workshop, with the aim of supporting youth development programs in building their youth capacity to be active contributors in evaluation.

Why does YPE matter?

There are important benefits that come with YPE. For programs or organizations, YPE improves programming, increases youth voice in program decision-making, and transforms program culture. For individuals, YPE develops evaluation skills; social-emotional competencies, such as confidence, critical thinking or problem solving, and leadership; and builds youth engagement and adult-youth partnerships. In terms of evaluation, YPE improves data collection, deepens understanding of evaluation findings, and democratizes knowledge (e.g., ACT for Youth, n.d.; Evans, R, n.d.; Flores, 2008; Zeller-Berkman, Muñoz-Proto, & Torre, 2015).

YLI mentors who participated in YPE also gave positive comments. Below are selected comments.

YPE taught and showed me what it meant to work in collaboration towards a better program. In YPE, there was no hierarchy. In YPE, we didn't see each other as a participant, youth, staff, or adult in the program. We saw each other as change makers, working to improve our program. Because we knew and truly felt that this was OUR community and not just mine or yours. What made YPE special for me was that I knew why everyone was there, and why I was and wanted to be there, at every meeting and every event.

Evaluation is something that never really stood out to me as something youth could be involved in. To me, evaluation was something adults did, looking at tiring graphs and data and turning it into pages of boring comments. I was proven otherwise [after participating in YPE]. In our team, I learned evaluation can be fun, and it doesn't have to be such an exhausting process. We learned how to read data, many different ways to acquire feedback, and how to carry out our own surveys and interviews to obtain data on how other youth in the leadership program felt and wanted to change.



What is the process of reviewing YLI's YPE?

This report explores these following questions:

- Does the Practice Guide and/or workshop meet YLI's YPE goals?
- Who is the ideal YPE audience?
- How can we structure the YPE workshop to be most effective?
- For those who attended the YLI's YPE workshop, what did they learn from the workshop and how can it be strengthened?

To answer these questions, Wilder Research, in collaboration with YLI, gathered input from its stakeholders by conducting:



A world café or structured conversation process for knowledge sharing with 10 youth development leaders, program practitioners, and funders in the youth development field (“experts”), including representatives from the University of Minnesota, Sprockets, Sundance Family Foundation, Youthprise, Minnesota Department of Education, Brooklyn Bridge Alliance for Youth, and Girl Scouts River Valleys. These representatives reviewed the Practice Guide but did not participate in the YLI's YPE formal immersive workshop.



A survey of Sprockets activators. Staff from four Sprockets organizations who regularly participate in a Sprockets workshop and collect and use data to make improvements were asked to review the Practice Guide. They did not attend the YLI's YPE formal immersive workshop.



Survey and focus group with YLI youth mentors. Four youth who participated in all seven formal immersive workshop sessions based on the Guide were asked to participate in a survey and a focus group. These youth mentors participated in YLI the previous year and chose to be on the YPE team.



Workshop surveys and a key informant interview with youth development program staff. This was one staff member from another youth development program who participated in all YLI workshop sessions on YPE. The staff member was asked to complete a survey after each workshop session and was interviewed at the end of all the sessions.

Throughout this report, we denote which findings came from which tool with these icons.



Did YLI achieve its YPE goals?

Through engaging youth in YPE and sharing the Practice Guide, YLI aims to inspire others to:

- Increase youth voice
- Shift the power dynamic from adults to youth
- Promote cultural equity
- Promote continuous program improvement

In other words, changing the way of being and doing for organizations serving youth.

Responses from those who reviewed the Practice Guide or participated in the workshop indicated that the Guide and the workshop met YLI's aspirations, especially related to increasing youth voice and shifting the power dynamic from adults to youth.



The guide helps shift youths' role from participants or "outsiders" to partners or "leaders."

YPE allows for a diverse cultural lens.

The guide builds transferable skills for youth.

By making needs, expectations, and goals explicit, it builds accountability to youth.

It disrupts institutional culture, which leads to changes in practice, which leads to changes in policy, which leads to change in budgets.

It establishes a new normal, establishes accountability to youth/youth engagement as second nature.



The youth development staff who participated in the workshop sessions reported in the survey that these YPE goals were obvious in the workshop. The staff reported that youth voice and shifting the power dynamic from adults to youth were elevated in all seven sessions of YLI's YPE formal immersive workshop. Racial equity and continuous quality improvement were elevated in five sessions.



Similarly, all four youth who participated in the workshop indicated in the survey that they agreed that YPE created an equitable partnership between youth and adults and they felt they had a role in improving YLI.

We are also interested in the ease of using the Practice Guide. Respondents who reviewed the Guide or attended the workshop indicated that the Practice Guide is easy to understand and use. It is also effective in presenting the connection between the theory and practice, according to the youth development program staff who attended the workshop.



All four Sprockets activators reported that the Practice Guide is easy to understand and easy to use, indicating strongly agree or agree with these two statements in the survey.



Overall I think the guide does a good job of providing an overview of YPE.

The Guide presents a well-balanced theory and practice. All components in the Practice Guide were effective and interrelated. There is no one component better than the others; prior components or chapters in the Guide prepared youth to go to the next component of YPE.

Who is the ideal YPE audience?

Many different stakeholders could benefit from using the Practice Guide. In addition to youth development program staff and youth participants, youth development experts mentioned board members, school administrators, youth councils, and researchers could use the Guide as a tool to engage youth as leaders or to help prepare youth to be future leaders. Someone who has commitment to be part of a YPE team, wants to learn something new, and understands the program would make a good youth evaluator, according to YLI's youth mentors. A few stakeholders also pointed out that programs that have the capacity and support, as indicated in the YPE Practice Guide, would be the ideal audience. In order to have a successful YPE practice, the Guide recommends that programs have designated staff, regular time and attention for conducting YPE, youth who want to participate in the YPE team, and the commitment to make changes based on YPE findings.

Who within the field of youth work would this guide benefit, and why?



Programs with "capacity and support" (according to page 4 of the Guide).

Schools, school administrators; schools who want or need youth to be leaders.

Boards/commissions who are interested in youth voice.

Youth advisory councils.

Organizations that do evaluation; research and evaluation leaders.

People who want to create a layer of staff or leaders in any youth program.



What do you think makes a good youth evaluator? What kinds of traits or qualities do you think youth need to have in order to be effective evaluators? How would a youth know whether they would enjoy/“get into” YPE?

Youth have to have program experience or know what to expect in the program. YLI has built in a way for returning students to be youth mentors, which helps.

You have to want to learn something new.

Want to learn more about data and get workshop on something new.

Want to learn a different perspective.

[I got involved because] I love YLI and wanted the opportunity to see the program behind the scenes, see how it all comes together.

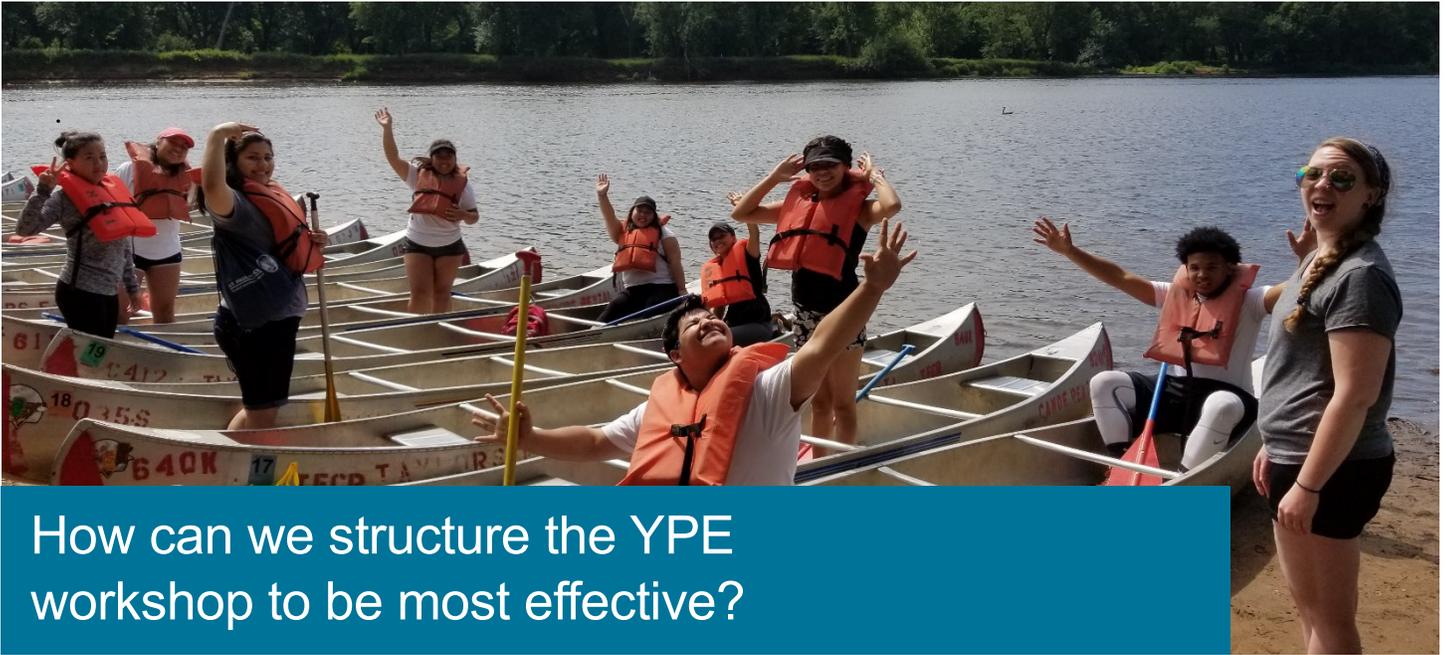


All four Sprockets activators reported that youth workers or professionals who provide direct service in youth-serving organizations would be an ideal audience for the Practice Guide.



Who would need training to do YPE well in your organization?

[Besides youth], it would be beneficial for [our] youth program director and youth program associate/staff to participate in the YPE workshop.



How can we structure the YPE workshop to be most effective?

In addition to providing the YPE Practice Guide, YLI stakeholders recommended that workshop sessions be provided to programs who want to do YPE. We then asked for their suggestions about important contents to be covered during the workshop. They recommended that the workshop would include some program planning components, such as about how to create buy-in from stakeholders, select youth to be part of the team, operationalize racial equity, and determine or increase program readiness to do YPE. They also suggested that the workshop use a variety of materials, examples, and hands-on or interactive activities to engage the youth in YPE practices. Providing information about how to select appropriate evaluation methods and use or create appropriate data collection tools was also suggested. Below are their comments.



We are trying to figure out what practitioners would need to implement the guide. What elements would go into a workshop for YPE?

Provide guidance for context, fit, and readiness to do YPE. For example: how do you know your program is ready to implement YPE? And, how do you get there if you're not there yet?

How to operationalize racial equity in YPE.

How to create buy-in from stakeholders.

Give examples of different evaluation tools and how to create new tools.

Include the importance of workshop on specific assessments to ensure getting good data.

Explain why particular tools are important, how to develop the right tools (and how to involve youth in doing this).

Have interactive process – stories, examples, case studies, activities.

Explain the logistics – what YPE looks like in practice.

How to select or elect the YPE team.

How to build organizational buy-in so YPE team's program improvement plan is instituted.

Cover each chapter in the YPE story.

Include [ideas for] possible supports and alternatives.

Definitely buy-in from participants and access to assessment materials, such as Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA).

Overall I think the guide does a good job of providing an overview of YPE. Additional activities will be useful to include and help to further develop a training model.



If you were to suggest the workshop for people who are new to doing YPE, what exercises would you suggest?

The one youth development staff provided the following suggestions:

Provide solid workshop for adults, especially for how to guide youth in critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making, team work, and communication.

Provide youth with technical workshop/theory on evaluation and then hands-on activities.

All of the activities (pairing, one-on-one, team work) are effective; they appeal to different learning styles. They get more out of it when they have team work with back and forth feedback.

Variety of materials is good, as well as agenda to introduce activities.

Perhaps allow for more time to reflect at the end of each module/chapter. You don't want to assign homework, but maybe introduce the idea for the next week in advance.



If you could design a workshop for youth to learn about YPE, what would that look like? (Probes: What size of group? What kind of setting, activities, approach? What topics would you cover?)

Do something hands-on, interactive, get out of doing the paperwork.

Something visual, including problem-solving activities.

Have activities that tie in and get away from the graphs. Do things that are more like games to learn the concepts.

Using Sprockets M3 is an easy way to learn the data.

Let youth do it for themselves.

For ideal number of participants, I'd say more than 5, fewer than 10 – the youth bring different perspectives and different styles, so having more participants is good to learn about and understand each other, but too many means you don't get to know each other.

What did you learn at YLI's YPE workshop?

All workshop participants indicated their satisfaction with the workshop sessions. Below are their responses about what they learned in the workshop sessions.



All youth reported in the survey that they learned about YPQA (Youth Participatory Quality Assessment) and how to make meaning out of data in the workshop sessions. Most youth stated that they gained knowledge and skills in evaluation. They also felt that they have a role in improving YLI and would recommend other youth to be involved in YPE.



The youth development staff who participated in the workshop sessions gave the highest score of 5 (“most useful”) for all the workshop sessions that she attended.

In the survey completed at the end of each workshop session, the staff provided the following answers to the question, *What did you learn today that will help you implement YPE?*

It is important to know [evaluation] theory before practice: definitions, types of evaluations, pros and cons, etc.

Learning the difference between casual or passive thinker, critical thinker, and evaluative thinker.

Comparing evaluation tools to determine what's missing.

Knowing how to construct evaluation questions in order to obtain quality answers.

Evaluating the questions or issues that come up at the Sprockets M3 [Making Meaning with Multiple Data Sets] workshop in order to select the most important issues that youth team will follow through.

Learning the mechanics of crafting interview questions to get information that you need in focus groups.

Learning how to take observation notes.

To further their YPE practices, the youth development program staff member suggested that YLI develop a manual for staff to train youth or other staff in the program on YPE and follow-up with participants after the group sessions.



Following the workshop, maybe a couple of one-on-one follow-up sessions.

Provide a train-the-trainer manual.

Youth also wished to know if their work made an impact on YLI, to do more primary data collection, to spend more time applying what they have learned, and to have advanced schedules for YPE workshop sessions.



See the implementation of recommendations as a result of the evaluation.

Do more primary data collection and examine it as part of the learning through the year.

Spend less time explaining – space it out with the opportunity to collect data. I wanted to take turns learning and applying what I learned.

Would be good to have a calendar/timeline for the year in advance in order to plan ahead.

For consideration

Overall, YLI's stakeholders positively viewed YLI's Youth Participatory Evaluation Practice Guide and workshop. Stakeholders felt that YLI's ways of engaging youth in YPE can transform youth development programs' culture in increasing youth voice, shifting power dynamics from adults to youth, and promoting racial equity and continuous program improvement. Stakeholders also pointed out some areas that YLI staff could consider enhancing as they are working to improve its future workshops. These include:

- **Provide guidance on how to create buy-in** among program stakeholders to implement YPE. Explaining benefits of YPE and managing expectations for the scope and amount of time it might take could be important first steps.
- **Offer specific guidance on determining or increasing program readiness** to implement YPE. Staff and youth capacity and knowledge about the program are important aspects of program readiness to implement YPE, as well as their interest in and awareness of evaluation.
- **Offer training on the evaluation basics.** We suggest that YLI continue to include an evaluator (hired by program or YLI) to provide training on basic evaluation methods, including how to select or create appropriate data collection tools and interpret data.
- **Offer training to youth development program staff on how to engage youth, design lesson plans, facilitate, and host a space for learning.**
- **Provide more examples of hands-on and interactive activities and agendas** for each workshop session.
- **Provide more opportunities for youth** to collect their own data, make meaning of the data, and make recommendations for program improvements and lead the sessions.
- **Provide more time for reflection at the end of each workshop session**

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