

Methodological reflections on a transformative participatory evaluation with youth leaders in community-based sexual violence prevention

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ABSTRACT

Transformative participatory evaluation designs are characterized by a commitment to stakeholder engagement and social justice values of inclusion and equity. These designs, when implemented with integrity and reciprocity, can support organizational development and amplify community voice. Guidance on how to honor the values of transformative participatory evaluation is limited, though it can provide evaluators and their nonprofit partners with a clear pathway to designing, sustaining, and executing participatory projects with a transformative agenda. This paper presents a transformative participatory evaluation project with youth sexual violence prevention leaders, in a nonprofit context. Across four stages – initiating the partnership, designing the evaluation, implementing the evaluation, and sharing the evaluation with others for change – we outline the shared decisions, collaborative activities, and meaningful outcomes of this evaluation effort, with particular attention to how transformative participatory principles were embedded in its design. With support, scaffolding, and funding, youth leaders contributed data, directed analysis and interpretation, and developed deliverables to share best practices with diverse audiences. Actionable takeaways for evaluators are provided for each stage to inspire more intentional and expanded use of this design.

KEYWORDS: Participatory Evaluation, Transformative Paradigm, Youth, Capacity-Building, Social Change.

Translating the intentions and values of participatory evaluation designs into action can be daunting. Like with community-based participatory research methods, participatory evaluation designs engage community members of diverse identities and backgrounds in the evaluation process and require a vast amount of time, planning, funds, and capacity-building. Unfortunately, few case studies exist – outside of evaluation manuals and textbooks – from which evaluators can learn and model their own participatory efforts (Liebenberg et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2010). Method-focused papers tend to either present project outcomes or provide a rationale for a certain design

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(Cousins & Earl, 1992; Powers & Tiffany, 2006), and those who walk readers through how to implement a partner with adults (Smith et al., 2024). More contemporary scholarships are needed that highlight the shared decisions and actions of a collaborative project with young people.

Written from the perspective of a nonprofit-university partnership and by its individual members (“we”), we present our methodological reflections of a transformative participatory evaluation design conducted alongside high school and undergraduate youth evaluators, in the context of a community-based youth-led sexual violence prevention program. This paper seeks to offer a specific case of how this design allowed a “descriptive intent” (gathering data with program members to understand impact) to evolve into a “transformative agenda” (influencing organizational development and social change; Mertens, 2009, p. 146). In this paper, we answer the following questions: How does transformative participatory evaluation work in practice? What can be learned from this project and applied in other contexts?

We describe how youth evaluators were engaged in a transformative participatory evaluation of their own experiences in a youth-led and community-based sexual violence prevention initiative called GameChangers. The GameChangers Evaluation Project (GCEP) aimed to apply transformative and participatory principles to (1) understand how young people are impacted by their membership in the program in their own words and (2) position youth members as co-evaluators through evaluation planning and implementation. This paper outlines our methodological decisions with particular attention to how our collaborative team applied the tenets of the transformative paradigm and participatory evaluation design.

We begin this paper by defining the goals of the transformative paradigm and participatory evaluation. Next, we outline how we applied this framework across each of the stages of the GameChangers Evaluation Project. We close with our reflections on the evaluation process and our takeaways for other evaluators wishing to apply this design with youth partners.

BACKGROUND

The Transformative Paradigm

According to Paulo Freire, as “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves, they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (italics in original; Freire, 1970, p. 83). This philosophy is central to the transformative paradigm, a model that guides the methods, values, and intentions of social justice-oriented research, evaluation, and community development (Hurtado, 2022; Mertens, 2009). The tenets of the transformative paradigm include a challenge to the power differentials in traditional researcher-researched relationships to recognize participant agency; this paradigm positions community members as scholars and scholars as allies for social and political reform (Hurtado, 2022). To shift traditional power dynamics, transformative research recognizes multiple and co-existing realities, seeks to understand unique cultural contexts, and centers the voices of people at the margins, specifically those who have been under- or misrepresented in research and evaluation and have not benefited from the research they participated in (Mertens, 2017).

In contrast to traditional research designs, but like community-based participatory research, a transformative approach to studying social problems fosters mutual respect and reciprocity to build authentic partnerships and uses data to fuel structural change. As community members are elevated as knowers – whose perspectives and analysis are prioritized – lasting solutions are proposed, executed, and sustained to advance individual, interpersonal, organizational, and societal transformation (Bakken, 2018). When the ethic of the transformative paradigm is central to project

design, methodological choices and strategies are required that enable “the researched to have full participation in the construction of knowledge that is produced about them” (Mertens, 2009, p. 36). Through the co-creation of knowledge, a transformative design can have a liberatory effect on all partners (Hurtado, 2022).

Transformative Participatory Evaluation

Transformative evaluation methods go one step further than simply inviting community members to participate in the evaluation design; the “social, group or collective analysis of life experiences of power and knowledge” is integrated directly into the evaluation process, rather than as a separate activity (Hall, 1992, p. 20). Participatory evaluation designs with a transformative purpose (1) address locally relevant questions that can advance social change, (2) empower members of the community with limited access to power and who have historically been absent in evaluation activities, and (3) produce meaningful and useful findings (Zukoski & Bosserman, 2018). Through their participation in the evaluation process, community members build evaluation capacity and drive decision-making. From question discernment to data collection to analysis, local stakeholders are transformed into co-evaluators, capable of understanding, planning, and implementing evaluation in their specific settings and contexts without the reliance on external ‘experts’ (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Zeldin et al., 2006). It is through this capacity-building that evaluation methods become transformative for community members and organizations, as they are mobilized to advance social and structural change in ways that respond to their unique needs, such as shifting community attitudes about an issue, informing new health policy, or expanding services provided by settings that are supposed to serve them (Mertens, 2009).

Inviting young people into a transformative evaluation process can identify new pathways for organizational and social change. Participatory methods are uniquely tailored to support youth agencies and can counter adultist beliefs held by both adults and youth members (Bettencourt, 2020; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Teixeira et al., 2021). Honoring young people’s choice and voice across the evaluation process is likely the more complicated task within collaborative projects (Powers & Tiffany 2006); therefore, specific examples of how youth are engaged as partners through transformative participatory evaluation can help evaluators discern what is possible in their own spaces.

SETTING AND PROGRAM

The GameChangers Evaluation Project (GCEP) came to be through a partnership between a PhD graduate student and RCC Sexual Violence Resource Center (RCC). RCC is a county-level, full-service resource center based in Madison, Wisconsin that has provided life-saving victim advocacy, direct services, and preventive education for survivors of sexual violence of all ages for over 50 years. Since 2015, RCC hosts a youth leadership program, GameChangers, that recruits and employs an annual cohort of 15-20 high school students from across Dane County, WI who receive comprehensive training on sexual violence, social justice, and professional development, and implement prevention projects in their schools, neighborhoods, and larger communities.

From adult mentors and guest speakers, GameChangers members learn about a variety of topics related to sexual violence (i.e., rape culture, bystander intervention) as well as other intersecting oppressions that affect survivors (i.e., racism, homophobia). Through activities, discussions, and lessons, members build professional, personal, and life skills (i.e., media literacy, time management). Students use this education and their own lived experiences to propose prevention initiatives for a variety of audiences, including their peers, school administrators, and

the public. Annual projects are designed, developed, and implemented by students and address youth-identified issues and needs. Projects have taken the form of many different mediums, including podcast episodes, art shows, webinars, and curricula.

GameChangers is organized and managed by a coordinator, who is a full-time staff member of RCC. The GameChangers Coordinator interviews and selects members from a pool of applicants based on their stated interest in the GameChangers mission, commitment to social justice values, and representation of diverse identities (i.e., class, disability, race/ethnicity, gender identity). GameChangers are paid an hourly wage, provided mileage reimbursement, and are provided with a meal at every meeting. These young people are positioned as advisors in the RCC, their expertise sought when new interventions or programs are developed or proposed for a youth audience. When GameChangers graduate high school and become alumni, they are invited to return to mentor younger cohorts as adult facilitators and RCC staff.

Assessing Fit of Transformative Participatory Evaluation for the GameChangers Evaluation Project (GCEP)

Alvarez and Gutiérrez (2001) encourage scholars to consider the suitability of a participatory design for their project and the people involved prior to planning. The authors seek fit with the researcher and the community, with the organization's mission and project purpose, and within funding and time constraints (p. 13). A transformative participatory evaluation design and the GameChangers Evaluation Project (GCEP) were aligned in three primary ways. First, RCC and GameChangers wished for youth leaders to be engaged in the evaluation as more than data. The GameChangers program itself is student-led, compensated, and incorporates capacity-building and skill development for members. Further, GameChangers projects are focused on social change and transformation by way of education about and exposure to sexual violence prevention strategies. The participatory and youth-engaged nature of GameChangers warranted a youth-engaged design to evaluate its impact. By extension, the goals of a transformative participatory design aligned with the mission of both the organization and the program being evaluated (Alvarez & Gutiérrez, 2001).

Second, prior to the GCEP, there was limited evaluation expertise among RCC staff and limited exposure to evaluation among GameChangers members. Further, the existing relationship with the university student evaluator served as a foundational resource and asset to the project. For these reasons, the team believed this evaluation could be an opportunity for GameChangers members and adult staff to build competencies across the different evaluation activities. Therefore, the value of a participatory design extended beyond the findings of the evaluation to benefit all involved through meaningful co-learning and capacity-building and to help evolve organizational processes (Alvarez & Gutiérrez, 2001, p. 8-9).

Third, at the outset, the evaluation project had the infrastructure (i.e., funding, time) needed to implement a participatory design (Alvarez & Gutiérrez, 2001). The PhD graduate evaluator (Hjelm) applied for and was awarded two small grants from private funders to cover all project costs (totaling \$7500); both funders prioritized youth and community engaged and accommodated a flexible timeline for project completion. The university partners (Hjelm, Dodge Francis) had methodological training, institutional support, and capacity to oversee the evaluation phases and facilitate the capacity-building requested by the partner organization. And GameChangers (Schwalbach) had accrued buy-in from RCC staff and directors as well as stated interest from youth members, who were excited about the opportunity to contribute to the planning and execution of the GCEP. With these assets, the collaborative team had a foundation of trust and reciprocity needed to support shared decision-making (Alvarez & Gutiérrez, 2001).

APPLICATION OF TRANSFORMATIVE PARTICIPATORY EVALUATION

This paper organizes the GCEP activities into four stages: (1) building and initiating the partnership, (2) designing a transformative participatory evaluation, (3) implementing the transformative participatory evaluation, and (4) sharing the evaluation with others for change. Below, we outline our decisions made as a collective team alongside frequently cited best practices from the literature on transformative participatory evaluation. We follow each stage with a set of takeaways for evaluators. Finally, we share the outcomes of those decisions and close with recommendations for evaluators and community partners who wish to apply this framework in their collaborative projects.

Throughout the narrative below, “we” generally refers to our collaborative team that included a graduate evaluator (Hjelm), the Principal Investigator (Dodge Francis), the GameChangers Coordinator (Schwalbach), and several GameChangers members, who were involved in planning the GCEP (“youth planners”). As we move into the latter stages of the GCEP, “we” will refer to the graduate evaluator/Project Lead and the youth evaluators. When “I” or “my” is used, this refers to the personal reflections, actions, and decisions of the graduate evaluator.

Building and Initiating the Partnership

Cousins & Earl (1992) affirm that evaluators who wish to be good partners must foster authentic relationships with the organization, taking time to learn about the organization’s mission and history and getting to know the staff. These actions, early in a partnership, set strong foundations for trust and reciprocity that sustain collaborative projects.

My relationship with RCC began almost three years prior to GCEP. I worked on a collaborative curriculum development project with RCC’s Assistant Director of Education during which GameChangers members acted as content experts. This was my first exposure to the GameChangers program. During those three years, I attended RCC events, participated in programming (e.g., empowerment self-defense class), and on many occasions visited the main office. I learned that in the 50 years of the RCC, there had been no formal partnership between RCC and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This added a layer of significance and responsibility to be transparent about the processes and expectations foundational to university-supported projects and to create access to university resources.

Transformative participatory projects should be founded upon community-driven questions and needs and result in mutually beneficial outcomes for all partners (Zukoski & Bosserman, 2018). What makes participatory projects transformative are outcomes that work to shape organizational and structural processes to be more equitable and inclusive, and advance social change (Mertens, 2007). These intentions should be the motivators for participatory projects. In early conversations with the GameChangers Coordinator, I learned that since the initiative was founded, no consistent evaluative data had been collected from members or alumni. This was not for lack of interest or value, but rather a lack of capacity and expertise to design a meaningful and useful evaluation process. The idea for the GCEP arose out of this community-located need. GCEP also served multiple purposes, in that it would qualify as my dissertation project.

The choice to use a transformative participatory design does not naturally “transcend the dilemmas of power” deep-rooted in research processes (Kwan & Walsh, 2018, p. 376). Therefore, one of the biggest risks to fruitful participatory projects are assumptions about the desires, capacity, expectations, and resources of each partner (Norris et al., 2007; Ross et al., 2010). Discussion and transparency about these aspects between university and nonprofit collaborators helps the project stay on course, avoid roadblocks, and hold partners accountable to the project’s stated goals (Norris

et al., 2007). To mitigate miscommunication and harm, trusting partnerships with community leaders can and should institute a checks-and-balances system as well as consistent documentation of the evaluation process, roles, and decisions.

To create a communication pathway for GCEP, early in the project we garnered support and input from RCC’s Executive Director and Assistant Director of Outreach on the evaluation plans, timeline, roles, and expectations for data and deliverable sharing. All decisions were compiled in a Collaboration Agreement (our version of a Memorandum of Understanding). During this time, I applied for and was awarded two small grants that would fully fund the GCEP, with most funds directed toward participant compensation, meals, and project materials across the three phases. This labor was in service to RCC, so that they could dedicate GameChangers funds toward running the program itself. Discussions with RCC staff resulted in a decision to situate me as Project Lead, who would oversee each of the project phases. I would meet with the GameChangers Coordinator regularly to make decisions, negotiate changes, and address any challenges, and would be the main point of contact with youth evaluators during the project.

External evaluators and university partners can play many different roles in a collaborative project. In the GCEP, I directed the project but shared control with key stakeholders (GameChangers Coordinator, RCC staff, and youth leaders), as is demanded of participatory methods (Hall, 1992). My role was as facilitator, capacity builder, and supervisor, with the ultimate purpose of ensuring that the GCEP stayed on schedule and met the goals set by the team (Zukoski & Bosserman, 2018). Across all tasks, external evaluators and community partners can share or divide the labor, so it is crucial that all clarify their desired responsibilities and roles (Ross et al., 2010). A breakdown of my activities as the Project Lead in the GCEP is outlined in **Table 1**.

Table 1.
Project Lead Activities in the GCEP by Stage

| Evaluation Stage | Activities |
|---|---|
| Building and initiating the partnership | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Attending RCC events and GC meetings ● Initiating partnership through direct engagement ● Supporting discussion of community needs and opportunity for evaluation ● Coordinating/scheduling meetings ● Creating shared materials and folders ● Locating and sharing resources ● Leading documentation of roles and responsibilities through the Collaboration Agreement |
| Designing the evaluation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Applying for grant funds ● Assessing fit of a transformative design and parameters of implementation to share with collaborators ● Outlining agendas and discussion questions ● Facilitating planning meetings ● Documenting decisions made during meetings ● Reviewing relevant literature and validated measures |

Table 1.

Continued

| | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| <p>Implementing the evaluation</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Planning outlines and discussion prompts ● Scheduling workshops and sending follow-up emails ● Purchasing supplies (e.g., pens, notebooks, sticky notes) and food for workshops ● Leading evaluation lessons with youth evaluators ● Preparing data (cleaning and anonymizing transcripts, preparing tables) for participatory analysis ● Processing payments (managing grant funds) ● Documenting and summarizing key findings identified during analysis for use during dissemination and reporting |
| <p>Sharing the evaluation</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Coordinating youth evaluators who are designing deliverables ● Running virtual deliverable development meetings ● Setting and keeping track of timelines and deadlines ● Coordinating travel and logistics for youth evaluators at presentations, conferences, and in their deliverable planning ● Identifying settings for article publication and communicating expectations for co-authors ● Serving as primary contact person for conferences, appointments, newspapers, and academic journals |

Note. These key activities, though presented in a list, do not realistically follow a linear path. Participatory evaluation is iterative as are the actions partners take.

| Building Partnership Takeaways |
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| <p>While the vision and aims of a transformative participatory evaluation are compelling, this design will not be appropriate for every project. There are many ways to engage community members and community-based organizations in evaluation processes; take time to find which work best for your project.</p> |
| <p>Communicate regularly and honestly about your capacity and progress with your collaborators, especially as you move into each new stage – this can prevent confusion, frustration, and resentment between partners.</p> |

Designing a Transformative Participatory Evaluation

Young people are often absent during the development and design stage of projects (Hart, 1992; Hjelm, 2024). This may be a result of adultist norms: assumptions that adults are more knowledgeable and capable of planning activities or that young people are not interested in making decisions about those activities (Hart, 1992). These assumptions can result in adults choosing what responsibilities to assign youth, rather than allowing young people the agency to choose for themselves from what is available (Teixeira et al., 2021). In line with the GCEP’s intentions and focus on young people’s experiences and perspectives, an adult-designed evaluation would not have been logical nor appropriate.

After the Collaboration Agreement was signed off by RCC and UW-Madison partners, current GameChangers members (“youth planners”) were invited into regular virtual meetings to

design the three phases. By request of RCC and GameChangers leadership, I drafted a preliminary plan for the GCEP that would (1) gather useful and meaningful data informed by members' experiences and (2) honor the values and mission of the GameChangers program by involving youth throughout the evaluation process. I pitched a transformative participatory evaluation design as a strategy to meet specific aims of the organization partner and match the nature of the program. The GCEP would be executed via three phases, with training on evaluation incorporated throughout. The phases would centralize youth members' experiences and expertise (Phase 1), meaning making and analysis (Phase 2), and creativity and visions for change (Phase 3).

Role titles for youth involved in the three phases were selected by youth planners to garner interest and signal value to prospective participants, and ensure their activities and contributions were appropriately represented. GameChangers members and alumni who contributed their experiences in Phase 1 through an interview and survey would be called youth experts in all published materials and reports, with participants who conduct data analysis and develop deliverables in Phases 2 and 3 named youth evaluators.

The planning team incorporated a youth-centric design in other areas of the GCEP. For example, GameChangers program provides compensation and the provision of meals at meetings. It was important to the planning team that the GCEP featured these for all in-person workshops, as both boost morale and reduce participation barriers for young people. By selecting the place where GameChangers regularly meets as the in-person location for workshops, we aimed to increase familiarity and accessibility. Providing compensation further reduced financial and accessibility barriers and reinforced the significance of young people's contributions. Framing payment as 'compensation' rather than 'incentives' was intentional. The term 'incentive' suggests an intent to influence a young person's motivation to participate and that their choice to participate is the aspect being rewarded. Alternatively, 'compensation' signals that the young person's engagement in the project is an expense of time and labor and that their contribution is valuable (Afkinich et al., 2019). The latter framing was used in the GCEP; compensation acknowledged and validated for youth that their leadership would help advance the project's larger purpose. Designating funds to reduce possible participation barriers communicates care and respect and these considerations promote accessibility and engagement for all youth (Kim, 2009).

The first task was selecting our evaluation questions. Transformative projects tend to ask questions about program outcomes, relationships and interactions, significance and value, and the emergence of sustainable change (Mertens, 2009); these kinds of questions give new direction to existing change pathways. In the GCEP, RCC staff were most interested in impacts on members while in high school because these data are often requested by funders. As for the youth planners, they were curious about how those impacts shape members' experiences long after graduation and influence the larger community through youth-led action. These priorities were weighed equally when defining the evaluation question and sub-questions.

Though still uncommon, writing and selecting interviews and survey questions in collaboration with the population who will answer them increases (1) the relevance of those questions to how the population thinks about and describes their experiences and (2) the likelihood that the conversations will draw meaningful responses and reflection. In a transformative participatory design, evaluation questions and assessment tools should be identified based on their usefulness, relevance, and sustainability (Zukoski & Bosserman, 2018). The accessibility of the evaluation methods to all partners is just as important as methodological rigor (as compared to traditional evaluation, which values rigor above all else). Furthermore, because transformative evaluation projects prioritize local interests and change processes, they value specificity and responsiveness of the evaluation data over generalizability (Zukoski & Bosserman, 2018).

To decide which indicators of impact to measure for the GCEP, I prepared a comprehensive list of social and behavioral outcomes named in the youth development and sexual violence prevention literature to explore. We considered which indicators had existing validated tools that we could utilize and adapt for a survey, and which indicators would be better assessed using semi-structured interviews. We also discussed which indicators would address RCC’s reporting needs (youth impact) and the interests of the youth planners (community impact). The final survey combined validated tools and original, co-created items on a range of topics. For each of the validated measures used in the survey, youth planners reviewed and adapted item language so that the tools were responsive to the GameChangers program and population and incorporated contemporary interpretations and meaning. As the team drafted interview questions, youth planners reflected on possible responses to ensure they captured the prioritized indicators and used accessible terminology. The vision was to capture young people’s stories from GameChangers in their own words (Aspiras & Aspiras, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

To verify the evaluation design met ethical guidelines, the Collaboration Agreement and all final GCEP recruitment material and interview and survey protocols were submitted to the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board. The application was submitted for full review knowing we would be collecting data from minors and in a sensitive content area. The IRB concluded that the GCEP’s purpose, questions, methods, and scope did not constitute human subjects research, instead qualifying it as quality improvement/program evaluation and deeming it exempt from full review (#2023-1541). The GCEP constituted evaluation because its questions assessed the design, value, or impacts of a particular program or intervention and its purpose was to inform decision-making and improvement in a specific context (Quinn Patton, 2017).

| Design Takeaways |
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| Your community partner or collaborators should drive decisions about questions, indicators, and goals; these decisions, when documented well, provide a roadmap you can return to if the project veers off course. |
| Make the proper arrangements in advance so that your participatory effort has the funds it needs to provide meals and compensation for your youth collaborators. Be thoughtful about the language you use to describe that compensation – why does paying people for their time and contributions matter to you? To your partner? To the project? |

Implementing the Transformative Participatory Evaluation

Recruitment

Wallerstein and Duran (2006) assert that “gaining access to culturally bound knowledge is a privilege” (p. 316). For this reason, participants are always assessing whether researchers are worthy of their opinions, ideas, and stories. Prior to any participatory or community-engaged endeavor, scholars are called to reflect on how our unique collection of identities shapes the ways we can find closeness or distance between us and our community partners (Muhammed et al., 2015; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Reflections on our positionality as outsiders can foster “personal

transformation in [our] understandings of the origins of different versions of reality” – this in turn supports societal transformation (Mertens, 2017, p. 21). Several GameChangers members and alumni who had worked with me on the curriculum project were familiar faces, but to many of the newer members, I was a stranger. So, to build trust at the start of the GCEP recruitment process, I shared my motivations and values for supporting the GCEP and why sexual violence prevention and youth leadership mattered to me. I disclosed relevant aspects of my background as a former survivor advocate, peer educator, and active community organizer, with the hope of connecting over shared lived experiences and interests.

In my communications with current and former GameChangers members, I described my role in the project, my evaluation expertise and training, and the origin story of the GCEP. I outlined the GCEP's three central phases and described the different activities. To reduce confusion for current GameChangers members, I emphasized that participation in the GCEP would occur outside (separate from) their regular programming and scheduled hours. Because the line between youth as evaluation participants and youth as evaluators was blurred in the GCEP, engagement in the project was framed as a “pick your own adventure” with many different opportunities to learn new things and collaborate with others. The team expected that prospective participants would have varying levels of interest and capacity to contribute to the project. Therefore, members were invited to opt in to what interested them and skip what didn't. Whether they were involved in each phase of the GCEP or only attended one workshop, it was the hope that the flexibility around participation would allow youth to feel a sense of autonomy across the evaluation process.

Hart (1992), who defined the difference between false and genuine youth participation, states that young people should be encouraged to identify their different ‘climbing goals or learning interests when considering joining a new endeavor. A variety of opportunities should be made available to suit young people's different developmental needs and skills. Further, incorporating pathways for youth to take on more responsibility or reduce their involvement over the course of a project are critical to inspire commitment but prevent burnout, especially in projects that span years, like the GCEP (Powers & Tiffany, 2006). Our commitment to engagement of GameChangers members at each evaluation stage provided a breadth of options for young people to choose where and how they would like to be involved. Prospective participants were encouraged to consider their personal interests and skills related to the project; What evaluation activities or tasks interested them? What strengths do they have that match the evaluation stages? Which stages would offer new experiences? This encouragement helped foster genuine and meaningful participation for everyone involved.

Participatory projects should always affirm partners' autonomy to choose or refuse participation (Coad & Evans, 2008; Teixeira et al., 2021); indeed, this freedom of choice is in part what makes participation meaningful. Choice communicates respect for each person and is an essential part of the consenting process. Historically marginalized groups, like teens, may view their participation as required, especially when the project is an extension of a program where they are a member or client (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Making room for a person's refusal of and boundaries within research or evaluation “turns the gaze back upon power,” opens a discourse about who benefits from that research, and validates that engagement is an opportunity, not an obligation (Tuck & Yang, 2014).

| Recruitment Takeaways |
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| While it requires a bit more planning, incorporating flexibility and versatility within the activities of your participatory project will allow more people to engage in it. Outline a variety of “opt-in” opportunities to accommodate different engagement styles and interest levels. Ensure a pathway for compensation for each. |
| The recruitment process is an opportunity for you to not only get to know your potential collaborators but for them to get to know you. Be open about your values and motivations; these may be points of connection that inspire youth to get involved and can prove your trustworthiness. |

Phase 1 - Data Collection

Unlike for human subject’s research, university institutional review boards (IRBs) do not require consent from underage participants for quality improvement or program evaluation (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2022). This seems counter-intuitive, as evaluation activities, similar to research, can be unintentionally risky, harmful, and/or burdensome to young people, especially if they are not informed up front about what participation entails. Ultimately, the responsibility falls to the researcher or evaluator to decide whether and how to incorporate an informed consent process.

In the GCEP, the decision to incorporate a comprehensive consenting process was made collectively with RCC and GameChangers collaborators for two primary reasons: (1) because affirmative consent is a foundational concept in sexual violence prevention – the setting for this project – and (2) because our intention for participatory analysis required transparency about the use of experts’ data. Prior to each interview, I reviewed an informed consent document that outlined how their data would be used, stored, and protected across the evaluation stages. The form clarified the subsequent (and optional) opportunities for engagement as evaluators in analysis and dissemination. Youth experts who were minors were encouraged to share the consent form and project materials with a parent or guardian, and those adults could contact the GameChangers Coordinator or Project Lead directly with questions. No interview questions inquired about members’ experiences with sexual violence, and while we did not anticipate disclosure of sensitive information, I was explicit about my responsibility to ensure their safety and follow university policies for reporting. A digital copy of the consent form was shared with each youth expert for them to return as needed.

Data collection sessions with youth experts were offered virtually and in person, with each interview recorded and transcribed with their permission. Final transcriptions were sent back to each youth expert with an invitation to revise, retract, or add to their testimony. This decision affirms autonomy and gives participants greater control over their own data through the evaluation process, in line with a participatory approach (Coad & Evans, 2008). As expected, the co-created interview questions drew out rich reflections about the GameChangers program. Youth experts shared descriptive examples, memorable quotes from adult mentors, and at times became emotional with gratitude, speaking about how the program, its staff, and their peers had influenced them in lasting ways. Seeing so much interest in the GCEP from members and alumni validated the project’s larger purpose and message: that youth-centered programs and projects are key settings for growth, connection, and collective action.

Phase 1 Takeaways

Whether or not your project requires it, a consent process helps make participants feel comfortable and respected. The consent form is also a good opportunity to break down the project stages and outline expectations. Always provide a printed or digital copy with contact information in case participants have questions later on.

After youth (or any evaluation participants) share their experiences, they offer an opportunity for them to read through their testimony before it is formally moved into analysis. This reinforces participants’ autonomy and choice about their own data and fosters a sense of ownership in the evaluation process.

Phase 2 -Collaborative Analysis and Interpretation

The goal of Phase 2 was to facilitate youth-led meaning-making of the GCEP data. Youth experts from Phase 1 were invited to participate in discussions of their collective interviews and survey results as youth evaluators. The transformative paradigm demands that all stakeholders – rather than just those with more power – come together to make meaning of the evaluation results, develop recommendations based on those results, and identify action steps for program improvement (Zukoski & Bosserman, 2018). Collaborative analysis and interpretation foster critical reflexivity and provide opportunities for evaluators to understand themselves differently through the data (Mertens, 2009). Time taken to ground the data in theory and shared meaning prior to analysis allows the group to approach the data from the same starting point. Then, evaluators view the findings as a collective product, supporting the emergence of a “higher-level, more synthetic knowledge” (Cornish et al., 2014).

By extension, a transformative participatory design asserts that youth have the right to explore and reflect upon their own data. As a result, the observations revealed in youth-led conversations about that data transcend what is possible from the lens of a sole outsider, are more representative of the data’s true nature, and accrue the “contextual input necessary to represent the unique youth experience” (Jacquez et al., 2013, p. 177). The resulting interpretation then reflects how young people themselves perceive the connections between the data as well as the larger implications of those connections (Cashman et al., 2008). Because the findings are gathered by insiders who have personally experienced the program being studied, collaborative analysis further increases the credibility of those findings and confidence in their accuracy (Cousins & Earl, 1992).

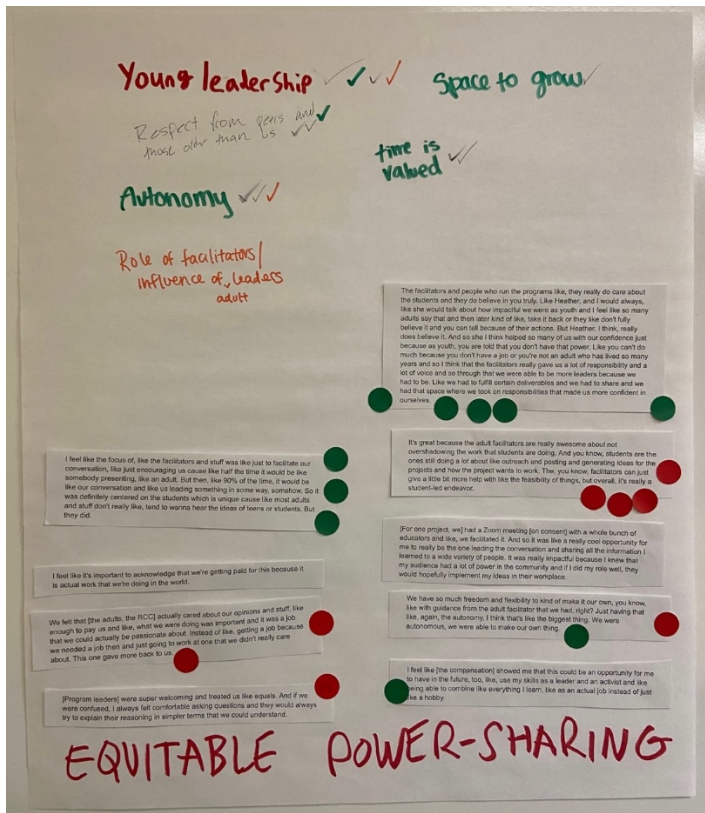
Phase 2’s structure was lightly modeled after Liebenberg and colleagues’ (2020) approach with a similar age group, though they only used interview data. To our collective knowledge, no guide to participatory analysis with mixed data existed for implementation with youth evaluators. For this reason, the design of Phase 2 was largely experimental, informed by the university evaluators’ combined evaluation expertise, and approved by RCC and GameChangers members. Phase 2 would be conducted in a series of in-person workshops, incorporate training in evaluation, and use a central theory to guide analysis. This design and the process of integration was well-documented and shared with GCEP collaborators to support RCCs evaluation capacity and future application.

Prior to beginning Phase 2, I prepared the interview and survey data for easy access and use. Survey results were summarized into easy-to-read tables that included means, standard deviations, and frequencies for each measure. I pulled and printed 70+ excerpts from the 14 interviews for the group to review and discuss; these were anonymized to ensure participants’

privacy. Slide decks and handouts were provided as well as notebooks, pens, and stickers to use in activities. I prepared session agendas, with time stamps, to keep the analysis moving forward and prompt discussion. The breadth of data and scope of analysis required this level of preparation. Richards-Schuster and Timmermans (2017) describe these as the “sustaining” and “gluing” activities that support youth-led efforts (p. 287). In this role, adults act as the “connective tissue” between the different stages of a project, managing logistics and communication; this is especially critical when the composition of youth participants changes stage by stage, as it did in the GCEP.

Each in-person session was designed to stand independently so that evaluators could attend any combination and not feel lost or out of place. At the start of each Phase 2 workshop, I directed a short lesson on the topic at hand: covering basic evaluation, thematic analysis, interpreting survey data, and data integration. Beginning workshops with training ensured the youth evaluators in attendance had what they needed for those activities. Dialogue on the intentions of each evaluation stage and action item reinforced the direction of the GCEP; this was especially important because for most of the youth evaluators, evaluation activities were new territory. Before discussing the survey results, we reviewed how to interpret the measure means and standard deviations and how the included constructs were defined. Before facilitating the thematic analysis, I introduced the driving theory and its different dimensions (critical youth empowerment; Jennings et al., 2006); Mertens (2009) affirms that theory can be a helpful tool for evaluators to locate patterns and guide their meaning-making process. For the thematic analysis, evaluators participated in a mapping exercise around the room, organizing interview excerpts beneath theory dimensions and identifying the connections or codes through facilitated discussion (see Figure 1). Later, these maps helped evaluators define themes and select compelling excerpts to be included in deliverables.

Figure 1
Participatory Mapping Exercise with Youth Evaluators



During Phase 2, I acted as facilitator as youth evaluators sought consensus about the evaluation data. I did not disclose my own interpretations or perspective on the data but rather participated as an observer and moderator of the process. With my support and through their conversation, youth evaluators directed data interpretation and synthesis (Coad & Evans, 2008; Zeldin et al., 2006). Consensus on the codes, themes, and key excerpts was reached through open-ended questions posed verbally and in their handouts. Youth evaluators openly discussed their perspectives and points of alignment and misalignment were documented for further exploration. At times when decisions stalled and the room became quiet, evaluators were encouraged to pause and reflect, before sharing out with the full group. We had frequent moments of silence and discussions were not rushed; workshops were structured but flexible to make evaluators feel comfortable and productive.

In all participatory projects, scaffolding is required so that each partner has the resources, encouragement, and information they need to execute their roles (Gal, 2017; Zeldin et al., 2006). Consequently, transformative participatory evaluation is time intensive, requiring “coordinating, training, and building the skills of diverse stakeholders with varying backgrounds, skills, and interest levels in the evaluation” (Zukoski & Luluquisen, 2002, p. 4). Scaffolding can further establish a baseline of understanding for a group engaging in this process and embolden future engagement in evaluation. The specifics of evaluation training can take many forms depending on the level of youth involvement, purpose of the project, and motivation of youth partners (Coad & Evans, 2008; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). With the GCEP intention to build capacity among youth evaluators, training on evaluation concepts and methods was an important component of its transformative design.

An entire workshop was dedicated to a conversation about how the findings spoke to each other and what they mean; evaluators worked to answer the question, “What’s the story here?” Youth testimonies and experiences, as analyzed and summarized by those same youth, provided evidence of impact for the organization as well as a comprehensive list of recommendations. These findings provide rationale for additional funding to sustain and expand the GameChangers program in ways that are responsive to what youth envision. Based on the GCEP findings, youth evaluators also identified (1) recommendations and best practices for other community-based and youth-led initiatives and (2) avenues for future research on the topics of youth development and sexual violence prevention. Taking time to reflect on what the evaluation findings mean for organizational and social change is an essential component of a transformative design, as it sets the stage for individual, institutional, and community-level transformation through the dissemination process (Zukoski & Bosserman, 2018).

| Phase 2 Takeaways |
|---|
| For many community members, evaluation can be a new enterprise and seem complicated at first. In early meetings or conversations about a project, facilitators should break down the different evaluation stages and show how evaluation might look in their day-to-day lives (e.g., class exams, assessing prices vs value at the grocery store). This can make evaluations feel more approachable and relevant. |
| Evaluators should take time to prepare data for collaborative analysis and map out activities and discussion questions to support shared meaning-making. This background work provides helpful structure to support collective productivity and time management during sessions. |

For a project to be truly transformative, participants should have an opportunity to review and reflect on their own data. By extension, external evaluators should *not* cloud the findings with their own interpretations; rather, provide opportunities for participants to dialogue about what their data mean for social change and organizational development and document these ideas to incorporate during the dissemination stage.

Sharing the Evaluation with Others to Advance Change

Phase 1 - Data Collection

Youth engagement in deliverable development ensures that the evaluation products are responsive to young people, useful to the program itself, and shared widely for greatest impact (Liebenberg et al., 2020, p. 2-3). Phase 3 brought together returning youth evaluators and newer GameChangers alumni to develop deliverables based on the findings and recommendations identified in Phase 2. All Phase 3 workshops were hosted virtually on Zoom, as youth evaluators at this stage were joining from cities beyond the Madison area. We hoped that the inclusion of more voices and perspectives in Phase 3 would continue the community-building and generational aspect of the GCEP and bring out rich conversation and connection between the evaluators.

RCC made several specific delivery requests, including a full evaluation report and executive summary, recruitment materials, and a presentation to RCC staff and board members. During the first Phase 3 workshop, youth evaluators expanded that list to include a variety of other products that interested them, including a conference presentation and recorded webinar that translated the theoretical model and associated findings for schools and other community-based programs. Phase 3 youth evaluators also voiced a desire to bring these deliverables into high schools and nonprofit organizations in the cities and communities where they were living or attending college, to expand the reach of our findings. To focus our efforts and time together, our collaborative team combined these priorities into a delivery list and dissemination plan.

The Project Lead and youth evaluators gathered for eight virtual workshops between December 2024 and May 2025. Youth evaluators identified which findings were most useful and for whom and collaboratively designed each delivery, with materials, support, and funding provided by the Project Lead. Because the structure of Phase 3 allowed evaluators to attend workshops as they were available and interested, the deliverable development process lacked continuity in attendance; however, thorough notes, outlines, and next steps helped evaluators stay plugged in, organized, and productive. In the first 10 minutes of each meeting, the group set goals and clarified responsibilities – youth evaluators self-selected which portions of the deliverables they would design and reviewed each other’s contributions for cohesiveness. Evaluators were encouraged to build upon their existing creative skills and to try new things. The rest of each session was dedicated to co-working time; youth evaluators would work independently in the same document or tool, un-muting to ask clarifying questions or to request feedback. At the close, we shared their progress and documented next steps.

Across Phase 3, the GCEP youth evaluators and Project Lead produced six unique deliverables including a recruitment flyer for prospective middle and high school students; a recorded webinar for community-based youth programs and nonprofit organizations; a comprehensive evaluation report for RCC; a presentation to RCC staff and board members on the GCEP; and a youth-facilitated presentation at a state-wide public health conference. As with the GCEP deliverables, products of participatory projects should transmit knowledge within and beyond the academy, so that evaluators and non-academic stakeholders can access and apply that

knowledge in their own spaces (Hacker et al., 2012). This transmission of knowledge about GameChangers was a priority of all collaborators but especially the youth evaluators, who believed GameChangers was a model worth replicating. Therefore, translation of the GCEP findings for practitioner audiences was central to our dissemination effort.

In addition to the public- and organization-facing products, a collection of youth evaluators worked separately with the Project Lead to co-author an academic paper about the implications of the GCEP for the sexual violence prevention field. Each author self-selected sections to draft based on their interests and capacity, and the group conducted an iterative and collective peer review process with the Principal Investigator. To schedule co-writing sessions and check-in meetings, the group had to organize around seven different university schedules. Authors tracked their writing hours and were paid for their time. This opportunity allowed youth evaluators to hone their academic voice and participate in the publishing process. In July 2025, the co-authored manuscript was published open access and describes the collaborative writing process in more detail (Hjelm et al., 2025).

The outcomes of a transformative participatory evaluation are wide-reaching, and shape social and structural change within and beyond the organization involved (Mertens et al., 2009). GCEP findings critiqued existing systems in schools and other settings that marginalize youth, while identifying strategies for youth leadership. Though GameChangers was framed as an exemplary of youth-led programming, the GCEP provided direction for RCC to expand its internal practices as well. Through the dissemination of youth experiences and GCEP findings, it is our collective hope that youth leadership becomes more normalized and funded, particularly in activism and educational settings. Further, sharing this project's evaluation process with academic and practitioner communities beyond Wisconsin has the potential to expand nonprofit evaluation capacity broadly and advocate for youth participatory methods in evaluation.

| Phase 3 Takeaways |
|---|
| <p>Deliverables can take many forms in an evaluation, including fact sheets, policy briefs, flyers, and presentations. Community members – and youth especially – have a myriad of creative skills to bring to the development process. Facilitators should elevate their brainstorming and co-creation and offer support along the way as needed.</p> |
| <p>While the possibilities for dissemination are endless, homing in on a select few not only keeps deadlines and goals attainable but allows enough time for co-evaluators to produce deliverables they are proud of. Evaluators should find a balance between what could be impactful and what is <i>feasible</i>, with consideration for the time, funding, resources, and capacity of the group.</p> |
| <p>Create as many opportunities as possible for youth to plug into the different evaluation activities and deliverables and document well each of their contributions. All collaborators deserve to be recognized for their expertise and labor, regardless of its size or scope.</p> |

Overarching Reflections

The enthusiasm shown by youth evaluators in the GCEP evidence that young people jump at opportunities to share their expertise with others who celebrate their ideas. Meaningful and enriching evaluation experiences, like those in this project, have the potential to shape young people's expectations for future experiences with evaluation. Gal (2017) suggests that because young people are chronically excluded from decision-making processes, many don't know a more engaged way is possible. In the case of GameChangers members, these youth already know they deserve to be part of decision-making processes. Youth evaluators' commitment to the evaluation phases and openness to learning across the GCEP may be a unique feature of this group; indeed, the existing relationship between the Project Lead and the program as well as the nature of GameChangers likely shaped evaluators' responsiveness and comfort during the project. Evaluators and practitioners in other spaces where there is not a natural entry point or foundational relationship will have to dedicate more time to getting to know prospective youth collaborators. Human connections can overcome hesitancy, show youth what engagement could offer them, and earn their trust.

At their best, relationships formed through participatory projects can expand young people's networks of support, identify natural mentors, and build young people's social capital that last long after the project has ended (Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Zeldin et al., 2013). The community-building aspect of the GCEPs design fostered connection between the youth evaluators, program directors, and the adult collaborators. Since the GCEP has finished, I have had conversations with youth evaluators about graduate school, participatory research, and careers in evaluation and advocacy. It is possible that exposure to evaluation in such a hands-on way can activate youth to consider research and evaluation as potential career pathways. To get insight to the project's lasting impact, evaluators should invite youth participants to share feedback on the process itself through an exit interview, survey, or casual conversation. What are their big takeaways? Do they have recommendations for you, as the facilitator? How do they see themselves using evaluation in the future?

Transformative evaluation affects all collaborators in different ways. For me, the GCEP reinforced my belief that collaborative projects require a long table; the findings from the GCEP and the reach of those findings achieved by the collective expanded far beyond what I could have captured or accomplished on my own. Stepping back to elevate the evaluators' perspectives and interpretation pushed me out of my comfort zone and strengthened me as a facilitator and evaluation partner. I learned that making evaluation an activity worthy of young people's time and labor requires an expressed and firm commitment to prioritizing funding, time together, flexibility, and joy. The GCEP became something I never could have imagined, and the community I now have with these young leaders will last a lifetime.

The investment in evaluation capacity-building and participatory evaluation must be sustained long after a project closes. A co-created design and thorough documentation of the process are useful tools, but many nonprofit and other organization partners will need continued support to execute evaluation on their own. With high staff turnover, youth matriculation, and funding threats being common challenges in community settings, keeping programs running can take priority over regular evaluation practice. University partners should stay informed as the oversight of evaluation is transferred to their organization partners, to offer guidance and accountability. For GameChangers, a simplified evaluation protocol based on the GCEP was developed that incorporates the same data collection tools and a streamlined analysis procedure with step-by-step instructions. As they move into the second formal year of data collection, the Project Lead (now graduated) will remain an ally to the process. To advance transformative

outcomes, evaluator partners must consider which methods are realistic for organizations to undertake that also return the evidence of impact organizations need.

Transformative participatory evaluation with youth has incredible potential to inspire social and organizational change informed by their needs and perspectives. Positioning stakeholders who are historically left out of the evaluation process – like youth – as co-evaluators not only advances a social justice agenda of equity and inclusion but supports young people’s continued community engagement (Mertens & Wilson, 2018, p. 160). The outcomes of transformative participatory projects should work to transform related systems and processes as well as the skills and perspectives of all participants (Mertens, 2017; Zukoski & Bosserman, 2018). With youth in authentic roles with real evaluation responsibilities, transformative designs directly counter adultist ideologies that young people are not interested in being part of these processes or cannot engage in them (Bettencourt, 2020). Ultimately, a transformative participatory design can offer a platform for youth to voice their visions for a safer, more empowered world and advance evaluation methods that center their big ideas.

Author Contributions

Dr. Linnea L. Hjelm: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Funding Acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Visualization, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing. Dr. Carolee Dodge Francis: Methodology, Resources, Supervision, Writing – Review & Editing. Courtney Schwalbach: Conceptualization, Methodology, Project Administration, Resources, Writing – Review & Editing,

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Institutional Review Board Statement

The GameChangers Evaluation Project was reviewed by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board and deemed exempt as quality improvement (#2023-1541).

Informed Consent Form

Though not required by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board, youth who contributed data for the GameChangers Evaluation Project received, reviewed, and signed an informed consent document. This form is available by email request to the corresponding author (Hjelm, linnealhjelm@gmail.com).

Data Availability Statement

Due to the nature and specificity of the evaluation data collected for the GameChangers Evaluation Project, the survey and interview data are not available for public use. However, several deliverables (i.e., reports, presentations) were produced to summarize these data and the key evaluation findings. These products are available by email request to the corresponding author (Hjelm, linnealhjelm@gmail.com).

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Conflicts of Interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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