

Advancing Youth-Led Programs through Evaluation at Vumundzuku-bya Vana: Our Children's Future.



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Country/City

This project took place in Zonkizwe, a peri-urban township approximately 40 km outside of Johannesburg, in South Africa. Zonkizwe, which translates to "many nations," is a product of displacement, created through apartheid's violent policies of "separate development." While laws have changed, circumstances largely have not. High rates of unemployment and HIV/AIDS mark the environment, while oppressive educational systems persist.

Reflections from Youth Leaders:

"In planning I've learned you have to prepare your things, otherwise you waste your time. If you don't plan you might be changing ideas"

"The reason we had challenges [with focus groups] it was because we want to see where they could have problems and how we could help them on their problems. We had negative and positive challenges"

"We have to reflect to not repeat mistakes"

"Sometimes it's difficult to plan, we think about whether or not [the younger youth] will like the book or activity"

Two Highlights/Takeaways From Focus Groups:

"The best way to discuss sensitive topics is to tell the group the topic beforehand and give them time to prepare and an option to not participate. These topics include xenophobia and rape/abuse, as many participants have experiences these situations"

"It is interesting to hear others opinions about different issues"



Community Partner

Vumundzuku-bya Vana: Our Children's Future is an afterschool, psychosocial support centre, offering education, arts, and feeding programs for children and youth made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS in Zonkizwe. It was co-founded by the Executive Director Nomusa Buthelezi and Dr. Jeanne Gazel at Michigan State University, and currently serves over 100 youth in the area.

Project Information

This Global Special Studies was designed to advance the ongoing work of Vumundzuku-bya Vana: Our Children's Future (VVOCF), by engaging youth leaders and adult supporters within the organization in participatory evaluation around youth-led programs.

Outcomes

This project gave way to planning processes for youth-driven projects and programs at VVOCF. In addition to youth-led data collection (focus groups), analysis, and dispensation (presentations), two key documents, outlining major reflections shared by youth staff and project ideas, were also handed over to the organization, along with a master report documenting the processes and findings of the two-weeks.

"Like many disenfranchised groups, young people have suffered from misinformed decisions and policies intended to help them but designed without their input. The involvement of young people in the research process helps change this dynamic, providing them with the tools to develop and validate knowledge and to influence the development of programs and policies designed to affect their lives"

Skills Utilized/Developed

Over the course of two weeks, the following research and evaluation activities were facilitated, in the hopes of building on observations and reflections already gathered, and engaging systematically in big-picture planning through action and reflection:

- *Learning/discussion about evaluation
- *Focus group facilitated by adult supporters with the youth leaders
- *Youth leaders collectively developed focus group questions
- *Youth leaders facilitated focus groups with younger youth, in teams
- *Youth leaders analysed and presenting findings
- *I conducted observations of youth-led sessions

Skills Developed: Participatory planning, Dialogue Facilitation, Curriculum Development, Community Development, Cultural Responsiveness, Social Justice Pedagogy, CBPR/E

Classroom Connections

SW685 directly informed the design of this project, allowing me to translate my own learnings, particularly around focus groups and participatory practices, into practice.

Lessons Learned

"The interpersonal processes of youth and adults working together, or finding common ground, is as [if not more] important as the more technical processes of data collection, analysis, and dissemination"

"Engaging youth in research and evaluation not only generates useful knowledge for communities and individuals, but also provides opportunities for the development and empowerment of youth participants, leading to benefits for young people, organizations, the broader community, and the research process"
~Kim Sabo Flores (2007)

Career Connections

- *Community organizing
- *Community-based participatory research and evaluation, with youth
- *Clinical practice with children, youth, and families
- *Social policy/Advocacy
- *Education/Educational Justice

Advice

- *Strive to understand the connections between local, national, and global issues, and consider at all times your positionality
- *Use problem-posing questions to engage yourself, others, and the world
- *Cultivate relationships before, during, and after your project.

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- *Youth leaders at VVOCF: Wiseman (19), Deliwe (17), Nsizwa (19), Zinhle (18)
- *Adult supporters: Thandazile and Phakamani
- *Dr. Jeanne Gazel, co-founder of VVOCF