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The Promise and Challenges of Focus Groups in Afterschool Evaluation

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In these days where "accountability" is the byword, organizations more and more frequently seek to evaluate their programs. They often hire outside evaluators to help them assess the effectiveness of their programs, to find out what works and what doesn't, and to determine what programmatic changes would be beneficial.

ActKnowledge, a New York City action research organization, is one such evaluator. In this paper, we examine an evaluation we conducted of an afterschool program operating in New York City public schools to reflect on the use of focus groups as a means of evaluating afterschool programs. Since the administrative office that hired us to do the evaluation and the directors of the program we evaluated wanted to learn more about the young people enrolled in the program and the staff that runs it, the use of focus groups as a research method seemed a logical choice. The literature on focus groups as a methodology provides a rationale for using this tech-

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nique although it also suggests some of the challenges. To this research, we bring our own experience in evaluating the afterschool program, discuss the challenges we encountered in using focus groups, and conclude with suggestions for future work involving focus groups in afterschool evaluation. While we reflect here from the point of view of evaluators, we hope that this article will be useful to program staff and administrators, as well as fellow program evaluators, so that full and ethical partnerships between the numerous stakeholders involved in evaluation work can be fulfilled.

Use of Focus Groups in Research and Evaluation

Focus groups have been a popular research method in the social sciences since the 1980s (Asbury, 1995; Bader & Rossi, 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1996; 1997; Smith, 1995). Focus groups typically consist of a small group of six to twelve participants who have some salient characteristic in common, such as belonging to a particular program. One or two trained facilitators moderate the discussion and encourage participants to share their opinions and experiences (Asbury, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1996, 1997). Besides asking questions, facilitators are also responsible for bringing the discussion back on topic if it loses focus. As Morgan (1996) notes, focus groups are different from everyday group conversations in that the purpose is to discuss a particular phenomenon, reaction, or experience. The emphasis is on the interaction the group creates (Morgan, 1996). This emphasis on group interaction is what differentiates focus groups from individual interviews. The discussions that emerge during focus groups allow researchers to explore a topic in greater depth than is possible with some other instruments such as surveys. Facilitators' ability to ask participants to clarify certain areas of discussion allows the facilitators to better interpret focus group findings (Nabors, Reynolds, & Weist, 2000).

Wilkinson (1999) notes that the interactive nature of focus groups addresses a number of problems of social research, including the possibility that the research can ignore and thereby reproduce power imbalances, that it may be looking at phenomena out of context, and that it produces artificial accounts of people's lived experiences. By tapping pre-existing groups such as a group of staff members, focus groups can gather information specific to the workplace. In focus groups, the information shared is produced in the same social context that the evaluation is trying to understand. As group members talk out their agreements and disagreements, researchers can observe and document both what information is shared and how that information is socially constructed.

Recently, focus groups have become a popular method in program evaluation (Christie & Rose, 2003; Morgan, 1996, 1997; Smith, 1995). Fitting focus groups into existing program structures, such as staff meetings and youth councils, has advantages, since it brings the research into the social and physical setting it aims to understand. It also enhances the potential focus groups have for creating a collective consciousness within a group about the political forces and resource structures in which group members operate. This consciousness, apart from formally articulated research findings, can be a critical motivation for creating positive change.

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Because focus groups are easily adaptable to different settings and cultures (Morgan, 1996, 1997; see Balch & Mertens, 1999) and because this method is particularly beneficial for participants with different perspectives from those of adult facilitators (Bender & Ewbank, 1994), program evaluators are increasingly conducting focus groups with young people who are participants in the program being evaluated. Evaluators and researchers in general praise the use of this method with youth because it actively involves them in the research process and values their feedback (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). This insight led the evaluators of the Core Arts program in Mississippi to conduct separate focus groups with program staff and child participants to explore the program's successes and areas of difficulty (Harvard Family Research Project, n.d.). In New York City, Thompson (2005) conducted focus groups with children enrolled in an afterschool fashion program to learn about their experiences.

Despite the rosy picture the social science and evaluation literature paints of this technique, implementing focus groups in program evaluations can also have drawbacks. For example, "groupthink," the phenomenon in

which participants conform to the consensus of a group rather than voicing their individual opinions and concerns, can occur during these discussions (MacDougall, 1997). Fitting focus groups into existing program structures can also have disadvantages. As we will illustrate below, difficulties with sampling and participant selection can alter the outcome of the discussion and, in turn, color evaluation findings. Further, conducting focus groups in existing groups of staff can reproduce power imbalances. Preexisting tensions or internal alliances, invisible to researchers, can limit the honesty and depth of discussion.

Context

The afterschool program we evaluated was operated by a community-based organization (CBO) in public schools in low-income New York City neighborhoods. We reflect here on the second year of a three-year longitudinal evaluation in which we collected program information through surveys and observations in addition to focus groups. The afterschool program typically served one-quarter of each school's population and offered academic support, academic enrichment, and youth development programs, such as sex education and decision-making curricula, as well as fun activities such as theater and dance. In addition to these activities, the afterschool program also provided students and families with such resources as health and social services, delivered either by the CBO or by other organizations with which the CBO had developed links.

Students in the program faced multiple barriers to school success: The majority tested below state and city standards, almost half spoke Spanish at home, all were exposed to violence in their communities, and many faced other family issues. Academic support and enrichment were thus key activities in the afterschool program, which sought to make learning fun and engaging for students.

Challenges of Using Focus Groups in Afterschool Evaluation

Our experience with this evaluation both illustrates the challenges of using focus groups with young program participants and suggests ways to address those challenges. We used focus groups as an evaluation tool because the sponsoring organization and its program directors wanted feedback from program participants and staff. Focus groups, because of the advantages of the technique outlined above, were chosen as a means to gather such feedback through meaningful dialogue among participants and staff.

The focus groups were conducted in the middle of the school year so that students and staff who were new to the program had sufficient time and experience to build opinions about it. In focus groups with young people, we explored their experiences by asking which aspects of the program they particularly liked or wished to change. Focus groups with program staff discussed issues related to youth development as well as the challenges and supports they encountered in their work.

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Although we have used focus groups successfully and extensively in other projects, we were surprised to discover that conducting focus groups with adults and young people in afterschool settings was not as easy or straightforward as we had anticipated. Though we continued to find that focus groups were a valuable evaluation tool, we also faced challenges with a number of issues related to logistics, ethics, and sampling.

Physical Setting

We found that the physical setting in which a focus group is conducted can strongly influence its progression and outcomes. In this evaluation, we conducted focus groups with students and staff in school cafeterias, libraries, teacher lunchrooms, offices, classrooms, kitchens, and staff lounges. Each setting carried its own built-in behavior program, which we had to consider and sometimes modify. For instance, when we conducted focus groups in classrooms, youth would often raise their hands instead of just jumping into a conversation. Social norms about who usually uses a space and what activities are allowed or forbidden are communicated both by what people already know about the space and by such physical attributes as furniture.

Although moderators can and do temporarily alter focus group settings, any space has physical limitations, some of which are easier to manipulate than others. The open echoing space and long, narrow, benched tables of a cafeteria, which limit the interaction and privacy of a group discussion, are difficult to change. Whenever possible, we used a space such as a teachers' lunchroom, where students are usually not allowed. Such a space not only helped ensure privacy but also indirectly let young people know that we valued their comments and took

their suggestions seriously, because we conducted the group in a room usually reserved for adult staff.

Privacy

Hand in hand with concerns about space were concerns about ensuring privacy. Once a focus group begins, interruptions disrupt both the content of conversation and the sense of cohesion among participants. However, when doing this kind of research with young people, the need to create and maintain privacy is complicated by practical concerns about who is responsible for the young people's safety and how they may react to an unfamiliar adult. During this evaluation, we asked program staff to leave the room when we were talking with young people in order to allow them to speak more candidly. In a few cases, participants tested our facilitation skills by disengaging from the conversation, being disrespectful to other youth, or walking out of the room. These incidents highlighted the need to balance privacy with practicality and safety.

Privacy is also extremely important for focus groups with staff, because their comments could affect their employment or their subsequent interactions with—and trust of—supervisors and peers. During this evaluation, more than one program director ignored our request for privacy—including, in one case, a sign posted outside the room—and entered the session with program staff mid-discussion. In these cases, staff sometimes expressed that they were upset by the lack of respect they experienced. Similarly, we felt frustrated because the interruptions disturbed the flow of the focus groups and indicated that the program directors were not taking our efforts seriously. Such disruptions thus provided valuable information about the context of a program, which we captured in the documentation and considered in our analysis of the discussion. From experiences like these, we learned to speak with program staff, and especially with supervisors, beforehand about the arrangements for the focus groups and to agree on ground rules to ensure privacy. Similarly, at the outset of every focus group, we discussed with participants what they hoped to learn, what we would and would not do with the material shared, and what limiting factors or concerns group members felt.

Sampling

Though much has been written on ethics in social science research, Smith (1995) notes that relatively little has been written about the ethics of focus groups, despite their increasing popularity. Social scientists generally adhere to specific ethical responsibilities including *respect for autonomy,* which means that research participation must be voluntary; *non-maleficence,* or the researchers' obligation not to inflict harm; and *beneficence,* or consideration of the benefits, risks, and costs of participation (see Beauchamp & Childress, 1994).

Because we take these principles quite seriously, we could not ignore the ethics of our work as we talked to youth and staff about their afterschool programs. We often confronted practical constraints, group dynamics, developmental considerations, and institutional power dynamics whose ethics we were forced to navigate more or less on our own, since the literature does not provide guidance on these issues (see Smith, 1995).

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Though the selection of participants for focus groups would most commonly be considered a sampling issue, it raised ethical concerns as well. In our search for a group of young people who would be willing to talk to us, we naturally turned toward the program directors. We hoped they would pick groups of engaging youth who were not afraid to share their views. While this method of choosing participants was practical, we wondered after the fact how we could assure these youth that their identity was protected when they had been hand-selected by the very directors whose programs they were critiquing. Aside from concern about possible sampling bias that could affect the validity of findings, we pondered how we could honestly tell youth that they should share their concerns openly. In retrospect, we realized we should have been more honest with youth about what protections we could or could not provide so that they could decide which opinions they wanted to share about their programs. Respect for autonomy includes giving all individuals, youth or adult, the information necessary to make informed decisions.

Participant Confidentiality

Another ethical concern was confidentiality. Participants in a focus group can reveal information about other group participants. As facilitators, we always mentioned

that anything shared in the group should not be shared outside the group. However, we also had to clarify that we would have to tell a staff member if any participants expressed harmful thoughts such as wanting to injure themselves or others. A transparent introduction to the focus group protocol can accurately reflect the extent to which the information shared in the focus group is available to people not located in the immediate setting. In our case, we explained that we would write reports summarizing what everyone said in the focus groups without identifying any individual participants by name. We also reminded youth that, although we would be sharing the group's input with the program, no one in the group should share outside the group anything a particular participant said.

Staff Support

Other experiences in this evaluation emphasized the importance of having the support of the program staff. Staff support can consist simply of helping set up a room or providing extra paper and pens. More importantly, staff support is vital to the care and safety of the young participants. In one instance, we arranged for a staff member to be nearby while we conducted a focus group with youth; however, when we needed help finding a participant who suddenly walked out, the staff person was nowhere to be found. Addressing this situation took up a lot of the time allotted for the focus group and disrupted not only the flow of discussion but also the group's sense of safety. While we thought we had taken precautions beforehand, we learned that we should have explored support logistics and expectations with staff much more clearly.

Such experiences taught us that evaluators and program administrators need to be clear with one another about the logistical requirements for conducting successful focus groups. Evaluators need not only to share what a focus group is, how it operates, and how it contributes to the overall evaluation, but also to engage all staff members who assist in scheduling and organizing the groups in discussion of the requirements for running a smooth focus group. Similarly, evaluators must accommodate the lived realities of the organizations they evaluate. For example, we sometimes had to accept that a director chose a group of young people for our focus groups based on the fact that those youth were free during our meeting time, though we wanted to include different groups of youth as well. Evaluators and program staff need to find a balance between methodological idealism and realistic practicality by communicating in advance about arrangements for the focus groups. We learned to ask staff and administrators what they would like to learn from the focus group. Reflecting on possible positive outcomes for the program provided an incentive for staff to ensure that the group went smoothly.

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Youth Development and Safety

Following the principles of positive youth development increasingly adopted in afterschool settings meant shifting our ethic about the goals of the research and raised additional concerns about ensuring youths' safety.

We learned to view focus groups not simply as a way to extract data, but as group activities that could promote positive youth development ideals. In the afterschool setting, the principle of *beneficence* (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994) needed to include positive youth development ideals such as encouraging the young people to participate actively on multiple levels and helping them to feel valued, safe, and supported. Integral to positive youth development is a respect for the importance of youth opinions and the significance of their knowledge in creating quality youth programs. We found that open communication with the youth helped them feel valued from the beginning. We used transparent introductions to make it clear that both we and the program administrators wanted to hear the young people's thoughts and opinions in order to make better decisions about programming. Laying ground rules about how to respect others' opinions also helped to ensure a safe space. Cursing at others or interrupting peers was discouraged from the beginning and reinforced consistently throughout the group meeting. We engaged the young people in setting the ground rules and in other aspects of facilitation in order to gain their investment in the process and outcomes of the groups. For example, besides participating in the ground-rules discussion, participants also were engaged in note-taking and in such aspects of group

moderation as ensuring that our conversation had one speaker at a time, stayed on topic, and kept within our time limit.

In our experience, problems with youth disrespecting each other or the facilitator mainly arose when a child had been forced to participate. We therefore told program staff that we wanted young people to participate in the focus group of their own accord. Young people's participation is helpful and important only when it is voluntary; a focus group will not yield useful results if it produces feelings of coercion and frustration.

What if an argument or a physical fight does break out in the focus group setting? When we ran into such precarious situations, we had to "decide if and how to intervene" (Smith, 1995, p. 483) in each instance. Although we had to be prepared to act, we also coordinated with a staff person to be available if the need arose. To ensure privacy, we tried to have a staff person located outside the room, or available by cell phone or walkie-talkie, in case a child wanted to leave or we needed help in controlling the group. Addressing this logistical issue prior to conducting focus groups helped alleviate stress not only for the youth, but also for us and for program administrators, who were concerned about the youths' safety and the program's liability. The need to have a staff member available reinforced the need to establish a clear understanding with staff about what we might need while facilitating focus groups and what the program could provide. We learned that it was more effective to reschedule a group when we became uncomfortable with the logistical arrangements than to continue in order to finish all groups on a timetable.

Some of our discussions with youth and staff were dominated by two or three individuals, while other participants felt uncomfortable speaking in the focus groups or were not able to express themselves verbally due to language barriers. Multiple avenues for participation, another youth development concept, helped address this problem. In our focus groups, we tapped into multiple intelligences through drawing, mapping, writing, and role play in addition to guided collective conversation (Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). Both adults and youth can participate in such activities, which serve to mediate power differentials and create a comfortable atmosphere (Yuen, 2004). When working with immigrant youth, we addressed language issues by ensuring that the facilitator was bilingual. These methods allowed all participants to express their opinions so that we could capture vital information that might otherwise have been lost.

Following our philosophy that youth and staff should continually inform the evaluation process, we provided opportunities for participants to offer feedback to facilitators at the close of focus group meetings. The Participatory Action Team in New York (Zeller-Berkman, in press), a group of youth researchers, used this technique in conducting focus groups with other youth; their findings have led to important insights about and improvements in protocols and facilitation techniques. Simply extracting data without attention to process is not in line with the ethics of the positive youth development that guides our work and that of the programs we serve.

Flexibility of Methods

Even with good communication and preparation, we found we had to be ready to adapt protocols and be flexible in facilitation strategies when plans changed. For example, one staff focus group conducted as part of a regularly scheduled staff meeting had an unusual high attendance of 25 people. Conversely, a similar focus group at another site involved only five participants. Though the ideal focus group is six to twelve people, evaluators can facilitate a productive group of a different size if they are prepared to change the focus group protocol. When we met with the large group, we shifted from our planned strategy of talking in one group to using a cluster of breakout groups along with writing exercises. At intervals during the focus group, smaller groups shared major themes of their discussions with the other groups. This combination allowed staff members to talk to one another about their ideas and experiences and still captured individual thoughts on paper. Focus groups with fewer than six people are challenging because participants tend to speak to the moderator rather than to one another. In our group of five staff members, we emphasized that participants should use questions or probes and came up with techniques to encourage them to do so. For example, the moderator can sit down among the participants rather than stand, so that the group focuses less on the perceived role of the moderator. Another strategy is to flip statements directed to the moderator back to the group by asking, for example, "Do you all agree?" With these techniques, we found that the few participants engaged in a meaningful discussion rather than simply providing short answers for the researcher.

We sometimes used role play and dramatizations as facilitation strategies in our focus groups with youth. However, we found that these techniques worked best

at sites where the afterschool programming included drama or theater activities. When young people had experience using performance as a communication tool, the role plays were engaging, fun, and informative. At sites where youth were less accustomed to this kind of activity, the young people sometimes found the use of role play frustrating, confusing, and even draining, so we had to find other ways to engage them.

Incentives

Since we were asking young people to take time away from their programs to talk with us, we wanted to compensate them for their time. While such compensation may not be common practice in evaluation work, social science research with children and young people generally recommends providing young participants with incentives (see Morrow & Richards, 1996). Interestingly, the literature on focus groups does not discuss the nuanced consequences of this practice; this apparently simple decision brought on new discussions in our team. We needed gifts for a rather large group of young people but operated under a tight budget. We were thus forced to ponder whether we should provide each participant with a present or pool the money to buy a DVD or a pizza party for each program. We also worried about how young people who were excluded from the group would feel about not receiving gifts. After much back and forth, we decided to give individual gifts only to participating youth, which meant that we were not able to spend much money on each present. We wondered how the young people would interpret our simple present of a school supply item. Would they be excited that we gave them a gift or offended because it was not very expensive? While most of the youth seemed content with their presents, some commented on the fact that the pen they picked was on the cheap side. Our experience with incentives on a low budget was thus mixed and inconclusive; our own solution was to go back to our funder to ask for enough money to purchase better gifts in subsequent phases of the evaluation.

Another challenge with the incentives was the question of when to distribute them. We gave them at the start of the focus group, using the activity of grabbing a gift out of a bag as an icebreaker. We thought that giving presents early on would show youth that they were not required to participate in order to "earn" their gifts and let them know that we valued their participation. Unfortunately, we found that giving presents at the beginning all too often distracted youth as they complained about their gifts or attempted to trade with other participants.

Program Change

After listening to the concerns youth and staff were voicing, we often asked ourselves, "What is being done with the recommendations?" While organizations initiate evaluations in order to improve their programs, they vary in their ability and willingness to implement the changes that an evaluation report suggests. We were asking youth to share their opinions in order to inform their own programming with no assurance that their input would in fact be used. To address this concern, we went above and beyond standard evaluation protocols to ensure that the programs responded to the findings. For example, we often created brief intermediate reports to be distributed earlier than our traditional report at the end of the year or term. We sometimes helped staff sort through recommendations to see which were feasible and to create an action plan for implementing changes. The evaluation feedback became a dialogue between the evaluators and the program staff.

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Lessons Learned

We value the use of focus groups with afterschool program staff and participants because such groups allow dialogue, provide information that we cannot explore through close-ended surveys, and give youth, in particular, the chance to express their experiences. Because use of focus groups with young people is a fairly new methodology, we found ourselves learning good strategies for engaging young people "on the fly." Perhaps the most important strategy we discovered was the need to be flexible.

We learned several valuable lessons through our qualitative evaluation work with afterschool program

staff and youth. First and foremost, we discovered that conducting focus groups is not as straightforward in afterschool settings as in some other contexts; it requires a deeper level of preparation than simply arranging for time and materials. We needed a definite plan of action, considering such questions as: How many participants do we need? Where can we conduct the focus group with minimal interruption? What is our goal for this focus group? Evaluators and program staff should work closely together to discuss needs and concerns, particularly those related to space, safety, and privacy. Focus groups are more likely to be successful when thought goes into creating a space that is trusting, open, and safe.

We learned to explain our agenda and set rules for discussion at the beginning of each focus group with youth. To do so, of course, we had to ponder these rules with program staff prior to the session, carefully examining which rules were important and why. Young people also can and should weigh in on behavioral guidelines for focus groups, which may be different from those appropriate in other spaces such as classrooms and program activities. In a related point, evaluators and program staff should have a clear plan of action in case something goes wrong, for example, if youth start fighting.

As an agency, ActKnowledge is reflecting on ways youth can participate in evaluation beyond simply being part of a focus group or other evaluation technique (Krenichyn, Schaefer-McDaniel, Clark, & Zeller-Berkman, in press). On Hart's (1992) continuum of youth participation, we are still in the beginning phases of creating opportunity for deep youth involvement. We are pushing ourselves to find ways of including youth as more active, responsible participants in the research process, for instance, by involving them in research design. We hope fellow evaluators and other programs will join us in the attempt to involve youth stakeholders not only as participants but also as co-researchers in the evaluation process.

Recommendations for implementing focus groups in afterschool evaluations with staff and participants

Evaluators and program staff should:

- Discuss focus group needs for space, privacy, and support.
- Discuss outcomes of the evaluation with staff to get their buy-in.
- Do as much as possible within program constraints to ensure participant confidentiality.
- Include in focus groups not just whoever is available but participants who can speak knowledgeably about program experiences, both positive and negative.
- Engage in dialogue about how to use what has been learned in focus groups.

Evaluators should:

- Establish a focus group protocol that is flexible enough to accommodate unforeseen changes.
- Be honest with participants about how much their privacy can be protected.
- Use focus groups as a continuous evaluation of practice, but be mindful of the potential effect of frustration about what can and cannot be changed.
- Offer immediate feedback, for example, in the form of short reports.

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