

Developmental editing

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Before

Focusing In: Evaluators Reflect on Focus Groups in After-school Settings

ActKnowledge is an action research organization in New York City that seeks to bridge the worlds of rigorous research and the on-the-ground work of social change by combining and integrating these approaches to create knowledge. We provide assistance to organizations working in the areas of community development, social services, community health, education, youth development, housing, and crime prevention. In doing so, our work mostly consists of providing technical assistance as well as conducting research and program evaluations. Here, we reflect on our current evaluation of an after-school program operating in middle schools in New York City. Specifically, we discuss the logistical and ethical challenges we often encountered while we conducted focus groups with young people and program staff. While we reflect here from the point of view of evaluators, we hope that our discussion will be useful to program staff, service providers, and fellow program evaluators so that full and ethical partnerships between the numerous stakeholders involved in evaluation work can be fulfilled.

In line with the current trend of integrating community-based organizations in school contexts, the after-school program of our current focus is located in and operates out of public middle schools in urban neighborhoods. The after-school program typically serves one-quarter of each school's population and offers extended services year-round by combining academics with a number of special in-house services. In addition to the after-school program, students and their families receive multiple services based in or near the schools, including educational and health services, which promote linkages between schools, families, and communities. Since students enrolled in the program face multiple hardships at school including academic difficulties (the majority of students perform below testing standards), exposure to community violence, language barriers (almost half of the students speak Spanish at home), and other family issues, the program provides academic enrichment activities for its students in a fun and engaging manner.

In order for us to gain greater insight into young people's perceptions of and reactions to the program, we decided to implement yearly focus groups with a group of students enrolled in the program at each middle school as well as with a group of after-school program staff. These

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Focusing In: The Promise and Challenges of Focus Groups in Afterschool Evaluation

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 technique, 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.

HIGHLIGHTED TEXT MOVED TO METHODS & CONTEXT SECTION

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

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focus groups were conducted in the middle of the school year so that students new to the program had sufficient time to build an opinion about the program and to allow new program staff to have enough program experience to comment meaningfully. The focus groups with young people generally explored youth involvement and aspects of the program they particularly liked or wished to change. The focus groups with program staff explored issues related to youth development as well as the challenges and supports they encountered in doing their work.

Social scientists generally view focus groups as a useful research method (Asbury, 1995; Bader & Rossi, 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1996; 1997; Smith, 1995). Smith (1995) explains that while this method was initially used in military training, it quickly became popular in marketing research and since the 1980s has become an important and widely-used tool in social science research. Focus groups typically consist of a small group of participants (including anywhere between six and twelve people) who meet certain requirements (such as belonging to a particular program) and one or two trained facilitators who moderate the discussion and encourage participants to discuss and share their opinions (Asbury, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1996; 1997). Aside from asking questions, facilitators are also responsible for bringing the discussion back to the topic of interest in case the discussion loses focus. As Morgan (1996) notes, focus groups are different from other (everyday) group discussions since the purpose is to discuss a particular phenomenon, reaction, or experience and since the emphasis lies on the interaction the group creates. This focus on group interaction is what differentiates focus groups from individual interviews. The interactions and discussions that emerge during focus groups allow researchers to explore a topic in greater depth particularly since facilitators can ask participants to clarify certain parts of discussion. This also allows facilitators a better interpretation of focus group findings (Nabors, Reynolds, & Weist, 2000).

Wilkinson (1999) highlights that the interactivity of focus groups positively addresses a number of critiques of social research including: research ignoring and reproducing power imbalances, looking at phenomena out of context, and producing artificial accounts of peoples' lived experiences. By using pre-existing groups such as a group of staff working together, focus groups can gather information specific to these situations. In these groups the information shared is produced in the same social context that an evaluation is trying to understand. ...

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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. ...