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Youth Participation in Evaluation: The Pró-Menino Program in Brazil

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Abstract

This chapter reports a participatory evaluation conducted in Brazil, where youngsters with life pathways marked by involvement in crime, and therefore included in social programs, were invited to be the evaluation team of the program. The experience provokes reflections on new technical and ethical challenges in the evaluation process. The authors also present a new methodological proposal for the field of qualitative investigations created exclusively for this evaluation, called FRAMES (QUADROS), which is inspired by comic books. The broad ethical frame is a positive “capabilities” approach to evaluative work with youth. ©Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una evaluación participativa realizada en Brasil, donde los jóvenes con las vías de la vida marcadas por la participación en el crimen, y por lo tanto incluidos en los programas sociales, fueron invitados a actuar como parte del equipo de evaluación del propio programa. La experiencia provoca la reflexión sobre los nuevos desafíos técnicos y éticos en el proceso de evaluación. El texto también presenta, en pocas palabras, una nueva propuesta metodológica para el campo de la investigación cualitativa creado exclusivamente para esta evaluación, llamados MARCOS (QUADROS) e inspirado por los cómics.

El marco ético amplio es el enfoque positivo “capacidades” para trabajar con los jóvenes de evaluación. ©Wiley Periodicals, Inc., and the American Evaluation Association.

Urban violence is among the most serious of social problems in Brazil, and its main victims are youngsters, especially African-Brazilians and those living in urban outskirts (Waiselfisz, 2004). Their involvement in crime is one of the more worrisome aspects of this phenomenon as it is often life-threatening and requires significant investment to bring about change.

Brazilian legislation includes an advanced legal instrument, the Statute on Children and Adolescents (ECA), which governs the rights of the under-18-year-old population and stipulates legal procedures to be fulfilled by young offenders. These procedures are called social-educative procedures (MSE-MA) and can be fulfilled under restricted movement (confinement) or unrestricted movement (in liberty). Primarily, the ECA statute recommends an offending adolescent fulfill a social-educative procedure within the community designed to preserve their freedom and establish a commitment to disciplined participation in educational opportunities offered by the state or by civil society organizations (CSOs).

MSE-MAs are funded by the government and are not readily sponsored by the private sector. An exception is the Pró-Menino Program developed by Telefonica Foundation in the state of São Paulo, which is an important initiative partnering governmental and nongovernmental organizations to assist adolescents in fulfilling an MSE-MA.

The Pró-Menino Program is aimed at breaking the adolescent-crime link, through 1- or 2-year investments in organizations that carry out MSE-MAs and that are committed to the improvement of their technical staff, as well as developing information technology activities with youngsters, thus helping to overcome digital exclusion and offering them new forms of social communication and relationships (recent world events have shown how important this is to youth agency and inclusion in social and political life).

After six consecutive years of investment in a considerable number of municipalities in the State of São Paulo, Telefonica Foundation saw the need for an external evaluation of the program. They sought to build learning capabilities within the program, influence future investments, and contribute to public debate on the relations between youth, crime, and the MSE-MA strategies.

A Participatory Evaluation Approach

The Fonte Institute for Social Development was invited to conduct the evaluation of the Pró-Menino Program in Brazil. The Fonte Institute is recognized for implementing participatory processes directed at formative

evaluative learning of stakeholders (Brandão, 2007; Dussel, 2002; Freire, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; House & Howe, 1999; Kaplan, 2005).

In considering the totality of projects supported by the program and according to Telefonica Foundation guidance, four organizations (three NGOs and one organization associated with the local municipal government) who provided assistance to adolescents fulfilling MSE-MAs were included in the evaluation planning. Each organization had been supported since 2005 and was located in different municipalities in the state of São Paulo. From the very beginning, identification of the evaluation questions, with criteria and indicators, was based on the needs and desires of each one of these social actors. From this dialogue, the focus of the evaluation was established as the then-current (in 2007) social and economic situation of the adolescents and youngsters who had fulfilled MSE-MAs in 2005, that is, 2 years after the project. With that aim, a sample of 1,398 adolescents scattered in the outlying districts of four municipalities were identified as a population that would be reached by the evaluation to gather information on seven dimensions: family status, school, work, health, housing, violence, and digital inclusion.

The Ethical Challenge

Within the evaluation we faced the challenge of incorporating the youth into the evaluation process. According to Dussel (2002), the universal material criterion of ethics is human life; any aspect that touches its development defines an ethical field. In order to address these issues in the Pró-Menino evaluation, youngsters fulfilling MSE-MAs were included in the decision making about the evaluation, thereby allowing them to influence a program that directly affected their lives. These youngsters, marked by social exclusion and stigmatized for their involvement in crime, created the possibility for the evaluation to serve as a forum for debate and the potential for learning among the stakeholders, and hopefully lead to decisions not associated with traditional institutional and hierarchical structure.

There was, however, a technical issue associated with the ethical challenge that had profound consequences for the quality of the work. The evaluation required offending adolescents and interviewers to meet, the former identified by their previous involvement in crime, the latter identified by the need to interview youngsters about a range of potentially charged and intimate matters. We anticipated that an interviewer detached from the adolescent's universe might reinforce the likelihood of inauthentic answers from youth in order not to expose him or herself to delicate situations, such as revealing that the youth had committed a new offense after fulfilling the MSE-MA.

One way to deal with this technical–ethical challenge was to establish a team of interviewers composed of youngsters who were fulfilling or who

had fulfilled MSE-MAs in the same organizations participating in the evaluation. Within that scope, young evaluators would form a group capable of discussing and interacting (ethically) within the evaluation process, thus constituting a group of stakeholder-peers. The interviewer-interviewee meeting therefore generated the possibility of building a quasihorizontal relationship within the cultural universes of both interviewer and interviewee, offering a higher degree of symmetry. Marked by shared language and stories potentially developed through complicity, the dialogue presented in the interview allowed the sharing of memories, information, and feelings, with an authenticity that might be difficult to achieve otherwise.

Youngsters With a Key Role in the Evaluation

The leading role of youngsters participating in the evaluation of social projects is a subject recently discussed in evaluation practice and literature (Gong & Wright, 2007; Walker, 2007; Whitmore & McKee, 2001). Walker (2007) summarizes Horsch et al. (2002) five key elements for the involvement of youngsters in research projects: (a) organizational and community readiness, (b) adequate training and support for involved youth, (c) adequate training and support for adult staff, (d) selecting the right team, and (e) sustaining youth involvement.

Within the context of evaluation of the Pró-Menino Program, it was essential to establish a rigorous selection process for young evaluators, as team quality would support the study's internal validity. The selection process of young evaluators consisted of four stages: (a) nominations by the educators of partner organizations, according to profiles suggested by the Fonte Institute; (b) submission of résumés by the appointed youngsters; (c) individual interviews with the candidates; and (d) administration of human resource selection tests (under the guidance of a specialized company).

It is worth noting that the entire selection cycle assumed a strong pedagogical intent, as it characterized a milestone in the lives of the youngsters entering the employment market. Twenty-nine interviews were conducted to select eight adolescents. The selection team's challenge was to be guided by previously agreed-upon criteria. The particular life circumstances of the youngsters undeniably presented a possibility for their exclusion and to deny them a new way to relate to the world. In two cases this occurred, but the adolescents were hired. By the end of the evaluation, the selection of one proved to be successful, whereas the other youngster came to be the source of some conflict with partners. Local monitors were selected in parallel with the hiring of the youngsters. Monitors were also young residents in one of the four cities where the evaluation was conducted and were responsible for follow-up of the work routine of the young evaluators. The monitors had two assignments: quality control of the work (time, behavior, task completion) and education (problematize, facilitate reflection, and identify learning from

past experiences). Monitors were essential for the proper conduct of the evaluation as they allowed daily, systematic, and disciplined follow-up of the adolescents, a characteristic which is relatively rare in their lives. At the center of the evaluation there was a coordinating team comprising two authors of this article. The eight adolescents eventually selected for the job were hired with due regard to the conditions provided in the Brazilian Labor legislation, with a net salary of approximately US\$240.00 per month and a weekly workload of 30 hours. They were also granted support for transportation and meals.

In order to undertake their roles in this evaluation, the youngsters needed to develop specific competences. Preparation took place initially at a seminar, where the adolescent's assignments were discussed and doing interviews was practiced. The interview questions were finalized during this process. Previously prepared questions were discussed by the adolescents, and as a consequence there were adaptations in the language used to make the interview appropriate for the prospective interviewees. A pilot test was conducted with youngsters from a nearby community and from then onwards the field stage was initiated.

Although marked by euphoria and enthusiasm for the new work, the seminar also presented a number of delicate situations. There was drug abuse, and conflict arose among the girls. These were taken as an educational opportunity for an in-depth discussion in which the actions were made explicit and discussed. The effect of this discussion was crucial in changing the attitude of the adolescents in relation to the work and formed the basis for new dialogues that were held during the following months. The premise in the relationship with the adolescents was to use every event as a learning opportunity. Nothing was to be ignored and, evidently, the evaluation team itself was also to face new and unusual situations.

Continuity of group education took place on a day-to-day basis, informally, with support from the monitors and from the evaluation team. Two formal meetings were held. One was conducted halfway through the process to analyze the ongoing process of the survey and to reflect on strategies, and the other was held at the end of the process to formalize the conclusion of the work.

Young Evaluators' Role

Gaining access to young interviewees in the target population was a challenge. The quality of contact lists provided by organizations, for example, was poor. In order to make invitations for interviews, telephone calls were prioritized and, in some cases, it was necessary to send telegrams and letters. The youngsters made the calls, trying to convince former participants of the program to participate in interviews. This was the first moment in which common and appropriate language was used between adolescent

interviewers and interviewees. This stage aimed to gather primary data on the status of the population in the evaluation. Thirty-five percent of the population we contacted, representing 133 youngsters, were unable to participate in the evaluation because they were in jail ($n = 103$; 78%), had died ($n = 18$; 13.5%), or were missing or had been threatened with death ($n = 12$; 8.3%). Such data clearly showed evidence of the level of violence experienced by this population. Nevertheless, the structural outline of this work limited the evaluation to youngsters at liberty, and it was not possible to interview those imprisoned. In the first stage, questionnaires were administered at the organizations where the youngster had fulfilled his or her MSE-MA. Concentrating the execution of this task at a single place helped guarantee greater follow-up of the young evaluators' actions. Youngsters were encouraged to participate in the evaluation by receiving pay for their transportation to the organization and also by receiving a small gift. The implementation of the evaluation on a day-to-day basis was managed by coordinators working at maintaining constant communication with the municipalities where the interviews were being conducted. A blog with limited access was created so that work experiences could be shared and also with the aim of encouraging young evaluators to write. Some visits were made with the purpose of motivating local teams and of resolving occasional conflicts between young evaluators and monitors. These conflicts were always solved through dialogue (individual and in groups) with all the parties involved in the situation. At the end of this first stage, a work-monitoring meeting was held to enable the entire team to consider results, describe learning experiences, and contribute to the strategic continuity of the questionnaires.

The second stage of questionnaire administration was marked by seeking out youngsters where they lived. Such incursions into the communities increased risks for the team; however, it was essential to augment the 176 questionnaires from the previous stage and, simultaneously, to add to the sample youngsters who had not been willing or able to go to the organization where they had fulfilled an MSE-MA. The assumption was that the first set of youngsters represented a subpopulation that was more connected to the organizations and for that reason more likely to positively influence survey results. On the other hand, youngsters who established fragile connections, who were still linked to crime, or who experienced greater social exclusion, might be more likely to decline the initial invitation. During the second stage, 73 (29% of the total) questionnaires were applied in different environments: residences, bars, on the streets, and even at drug-trafficking points.

Once all the data were collected, the young evaluators dedicated themselves to preparing the interview results for statistical analysis. This period of analysis was particularly challenging, because it characterized a moment when others were conducting the statistical analysis, which resulted in a period of inactivity for the youngsters. In an attempt to deal with idleness

the youth were asked to elaborate upon reports (yet another effort to stimulate the practice of writing), and study the ECA statute or other subjects that would subsequently provide them with evidence to discuss the results. However, these suggestions had little take-up among the youngsters. There was an attempt to discuss alternatives, but, nothing productive was achieved, in contrast with the dynamic fieldwork of applying questionnaires, which the youth found quite stimulating. Once the data were analyzed, they were sent to the teams of each municipality so that each one could prepare presentations for the groups of educators from the MSE-MA assistance organizations. This activity required the development of some computer skills, as well as an understanding of the information obtained. One-day presentation dates were scheduled at each municipality; these events were taken seriously by many of the youth. We observed some of the youngsters in formal attire, proudly presenting evaluation results to those who had been their educators. Youngsters had absolute autonomy regarding the presentations. They were free to present the results in their own way and in their own style: one group made a video presentation and the others used PowerPoint. Evaluation coordinators were expected to contribute with one another with comments or questions that might stimulate the debate. This was the space in which equal participation in the evaluations was achieved, beyond the evaluation team's data-collection activities. Symmetrical discursive communities (Dussel, 2002) were created that enabled horizontal discussions within an environment where the previously excluded had the power to speak up. The meeting between youngsters and the Executive Board of Telefonica Foundation was yet another moment with similar resonance. To conclude this stage of the evaluation, a seminar was proposed with the purpose of critically discussing the evaluation experience with the youngsters in order to reinforce acquired knowledge, as well as preparing them for the conclusion of the work and better preparing them to face the employment market. Surprisingly, the meeting was of little interest to the adolescents. Concern with the conclusion of the work and with placement in another income-generating activity seemed to be of much more concern to the coordinating team than to the adolescents themselves. The need to perform well in order to qualify for the evaluation work, which was a strong point in the first meeting, no longer prevailed.

Knowledge Gained From Working With Young Evaluators

The experience of working with the evaluation meant a great deal to the youngsters involved and provided the opportunity to face a new challenge with proper working conditions, within an institutional structure. At first, the young evaluators seemed motivated by the work and wages. On the other hand, the Fonte Institute team hoped the youth would participate in debates and reflections, and expected them to learn. These different motivations required constant realignment of expectations in a systematic search

for the understanding of both (coordinators and young evaluators), so work results would adequately satisfy all those interested.

In that sense, the creation of a critical orientation to debate was a serious challenge for the coordinating team, which was only partially satisfied at the conclusion of the project. Deep down, expectations regarding this level of participation were too high for the circumstances and for the profile of the work team. Nonetheless, the impact that an initiative of this nature had on the lives of these youngsters is noteworthy. Self-esteem was raised, life projects were conceived, relationships with educators from partner organizations matured, and even improvements in family relationships were observed. The horizontal characteristic of the conversation created by the young evaluators in meeting with the interviewees seemed also to have brought the desired effects. Good evidence of this is the presence of sensitive data at consistent and even concerning levels, such as the index of youngsters who admitted to having committed new offenses after having fulfilled a MSE-MA ($n = 70$; 28.1%).

One aspect of this work discussed by Walker (2007) is the involvement of educators from participating organizations in the evaluation. We acknowledge there was good communication throughout the evaluation, which, however, could have reached further depth at several time points, such as providing a more consistent debate during the selection process, which could better guide the decisions of the coordinating team.

Reflecting on the selection process, it seems clear now that acting solely on objective criteria is complicated in the life scenario of these youngsters and, particularly, in the relationship established among them and those who select them. Adopting the youngster's exclusion status as a hiring criterion was of relevance for this evaluation, which meant acknowledging the evaluation process as an intervention in the pathway of these individuals' lives. There is no doubt that, recognizing the need for such an intervention, the evaluation process must also have pedagogical rigor, increasing the challenge of the work. The formality of the employment agreement, which demanded from the young evaluators a certain number of hours of weekly engagement, resulted in situations in which performativity was limited and where team morale tended to diminish. Fluctuations in the intensity of the evaluation workload were reflected in the mood changes of the group. It was a challenge to sustain a repertoire of strategies to maintain young evaluators constantly involved in evaluation-related actions. Finally, it is clear that the participatory strategy made the operation of the evaluation more complex and required constant strategic reflection.

The results obtained through this process impacted the organizations involved in the program differently. The evaluation was important for the funding foundation. It showed the relevance of having adopted an active role in politics in incorporating into its project-financing work the responsibility for creating public spaces for debate, adopting a critical stance regarding the topic, and connecting with relevant political actors.

Both this bold proposal and the data collected encouraged the Foundation to publish a book (see <http://institutofonte.org.br/vozes-e-olhares>) that describes the evaluation process and presents the results found. The book launch itself has already constituted a political arena to debate the issue of youth in conflict with the law in the presence of public authorities.

The utility of the evaluation varied among the four organizations executing the program. On the one hand it allowed the two stronger organizations to feed the debates held in the political arenas such as the Council on Children and Adolescents, as well as generate visibility for their work. On the other hand, the two organizations that demonstrated greater organizational fragility did not use the evaluation.

FRAMES: A New Methodological Proposal for Qualitative Investigation

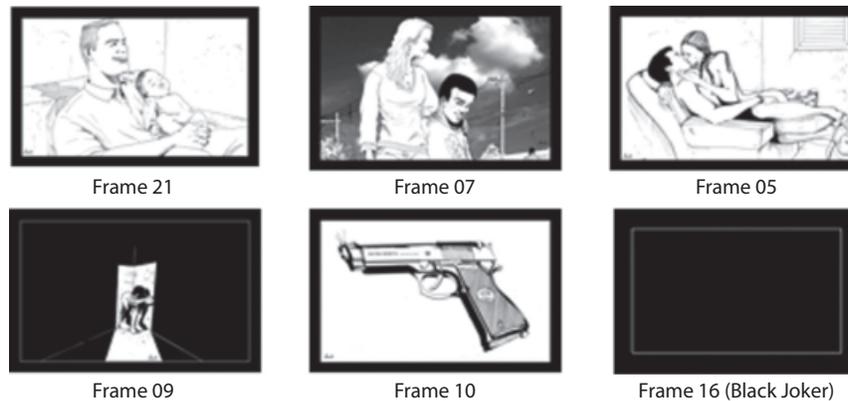
Within the scope of the social problem investigated in this evaluation, an important political issue rose from the debate on its main question: What is the life path of the youngsters? The plan was to understand the results fully by means of quantitative investigation. But the goal was to build a methodological repertoire that allowed a comprehensive analysis of the problem, one that goes beyond a reading in which responsibility for the current life status of the youngster who committed an offense would be a causal or linear relationship with the MSE-MA that he or she fulfilled. This problem is a focus for heated debates in the country.

Attempting to get a more comprehensive picture might normally lead to the use of adolescent biographies, and there would be a tendency to appeal to more traditional methods such as individual or focus-group interviews and observations. However, the need to work in four municipalities, with a short period of time for the fieldwork, and the importance of registering the lives of a significant number of youngsters led the evaluation team to think of new techniques to face this situation. It was in this context that the FRAMES (QUADROS) method came to life.

FRAMES consists of 27 drawings (Figure 5.1) that reveal situations that might occur in the lives of youngsters in social-exclusion situations at several levels. These pictures were drawn from debates with youngsters, educators, and bibliographical analysis. They are scenes that allow multiple interpretations and have the power to trigger a dialogue with the youngster. The final pictures were chosen after a trial run was conducted (with eight youngsters, individually) where some frames were discarded and many of them modified. Evidently, the repertoire of scenes ($n = 27$) is limited in relation to the possibilities of a life, and to accommodate unknown possibilities two “joker” pictures were created; that is, totally white or black frames that allow the representation of any situation.

The FRAMES method was used throughout the process of interviewing the youngsters. After completing the questionnaires, youth were invited

Figure 5.1. Examples of Drawings From the FRAMES Method



to participate in the FRAMES task, which was administered by anthropologists and psychologists with experience working with youngsters similar to those of the individuals in this evaluation. Young evaluators did not act at this moment. The task was individually administered. All drawings were presented to the youngsters (on the floor, on a desk, wherever there was enough space available) and conversation began with questions such as “what catches your eye?” or “which drawing do you relate to?” In this manner a dialogue began, the main purpose of which was to learn about points on the life path of young offenders. Conversation was stimulated by the drawings; however, it could take any direction established at the meeting between the interviewer and youngster. After every association made by the youngster guided by the drawings, the pictures were readopted to search for new elements and search for new meanings. Thirty administrations of FRAMES were conducted and all the drawings were referred to—narratives used from 2 to 16 drawings and the administration time lasted between 40 minutes and 5 hours.

The FRAMES method proved to be a useful tool in evaluation processes linked to the issue in question, but it can be adapted as a pedagogical instrument to be used by educators who work with this population. The FRAMES method is not, and is not intended to be, a psychological test. Rather, it is a device for mediating dialogue. Out of the total number of administrations, nine stories were chosen for more in-depth analysis, with a reading that seeks to recognize the particularity of each individual life and at the same time seeks to recognize common universal experiences.

The drawings that compose FRAMES have been reproduced and distributed to professionals in Brazil who work with youngsters in risk situations. They have been useful to the field of evaluation but also well beyond it, for example, having an influence on care practices for excluded youngsters. There are records of several different types of applications that range

from individual or group interviews to interviews with hearing-challenged youngsters, efforts in the fine arts, the elaboration of comics, and elsewhere. According to reports from these professionals the materials have contributed to the building of dialogue with these youngsters.

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