

Tools for Evaluating Very, Very Young Emerging Leaders

Shirley B. McNeill, Ph.D.
4-H Youth Development Specialist
N. C. A&T State University
Greensboro, NC 27420
Phone: 336-334-7957
Fax: 336-334-7432
e-mail: mcneills@ncat.edu

Overview:

When I think of evaluation, what comes to mind is our efforts to obtain supporting evidence on the effectiveness of the North Carolina A&T State University Cooperative Extension Program's K-3rd Grade youth program, guides, and curricula. Mustian (2000) defines evaluation as, "a process consisting of certain key elements: systematic process; collection of evidence; analysis of evidence; interpretation of evidence; and presentation of findings to interested stakeholders."

The 4-H K-3rd Grade Youth Program encourages cooperative group learning, and continuous leadership evaluations. Frequent, documented evaluation of local youth development efforts benefit educational programs by providing feedback, which can be used to guide processes, curricula, and teaching strategies. Evaluation provides insights into program results, indicates whether or not goals have been achieved, and what, if any, new goals need to be established. Evaluation also holds the potential to enhance the image of youth development, help in gaining community support and sponsorships, and assistance in developing leadership skills at early ages. The development of life-skills at an early age is significant because today's youth are acquiring concepts, attitudes, and behaviors very early in their development.

The K-3rd Grade Youth program uses evaluation to:

- provide evidence of life-skill development and learning
- provide a framework for recording knowledge gains through experiential curricula
- identify the increases in parent /child interactions

Process & Curricula Evaluations

Process evaluation assists in group planning, management operations, and awards and recognition. Process evaluation documents group performance and progress towards goals. *Curricula evaluation* focuses on the usefulness of the learning materials and their contents - their age-appropriateness, and application of experiential learning principles. Curricula evaluation helps ensure that youth are obtaining experiential experiences that stimulate learning and critical thinking. Periodically, throughout the year and at the end of the year, the effectiveness of the youth group processes and the curricula should be evaluated.

The K-3rd Grade youth curricula, consisting of youth mini-projects and activity guides, are formatted as how-to manuals to help youth gain new skills experientially. Because most children ages 5-to-8 have not developed extensive language skills or writing skills, the evaluations used in the K-3rd Grade youth program require the assistance of parents/partners.

The checklists found at the beginning and end of each of the K-3rd Grade mini-project books, along with the exercises and experiences in the books, enable parents to reliably identify skills, knowledge, behaviors, and depth of understanding in a specific area or subject. Worksheets, checklists, and activities using paper and pencil are useful in helping groups process what they have learned. Youth use worksheets to circle pictures of activities, check what was learned, draw what was

learned, or draw a face describing how they felt before, during or after an activity. These sheets can be compiled to provide youth and their parents with records of activities, and this becomes a mean of informing county agents and field staffs what was learned and how it was learned. Scrapbooks, pamphlets, teaching bulletin boards, games, scrolls, movies, models, displays, mini-centers, pictorial essays, and learning kits are also strategies that may be used to gain information about the progress of young children.

Helm, et al. (1998) reported that narratives could be written by parents to tell the story of a learning experience. The narratives can take the form of stories for or by youth, records of conversations with other parents, parent/partner journals, and narratives for adults in the form of books and letters, or visual displays. They are usually created over a period of time, marking change and growth in knowledge, skills, and attitudes. For children 5-8, products are the most obvious means of documenting learning. Pictures, musical expressions, constructions, collections, and other hand-made items also produce documentation of youth learning. Self-evaluation is the most meaningful type of evaluation for young children. It is important to ask the learners directly what they learned, and listen attentively. This makes it possible to determine whether the intended concepts or skills were learned, how the youth perceived their learning, and what misconceptions may need to be corrected. Attitude adjustments, behaviors changes, practices modified may also be identified by self-evaluations.

Evaluation Instruments/Tools

Although there are a number of evaluation strategies used by the program, three tools for evaluation were designed for The North Carolina K-3rd Grade Youth Program. The *K-3rd Grade Experiential Behavior Checklist* is a structured on notes or other indicators of progress. The K-3rd Grade Experiential Behavior Checklist consists of twenty-seven descriptive statements, using a rating scale of 0-5 to measure how well youth are using experiencing, sharing, processing, generalizing, and applying skills. This tool is designed to be a pre- and post- participation test to measure the cooperation demonstrated, and to identify how well the group is performing experientially. Effective use of the experiential model ensures that youth will find and experience meaning in their learning, and will not be involved in merely rote learning.

A questionnaire is a pen-and-paper instrument for getting similar information from parent/partners, which can be tabulated and discussed numerically. The questionnaires were handed out for completion out on the spot, and a few were handed out and returned at a later time. The questionnaire was used because the format lends itself to gathering information about what people do, have, think, know, feel, or want. Two questionnaires were designed for the K-3rd Grade Program: the *K-3rd Grade Parent Interaction Form* and the *K-3rd Grade Youth Curriculum Evaluation Form*.

The *Parent Interaction Form* is a questionnaire consisting of 10 questions related to parent/child interactions when they used the youth K-3rd Grade curricula. Checklists, notes to parents, and child/parent fun activities are included in the mini-project booklets. This encourages parental interactions with children, and gives participants a place to record them. Strengthening family interactions through planned activities is one of the objectives of the K-3rd Grade Program. Parents are requested to assist youth in understanding the objectives, completing the two checklists in their manuals, and in the completion of selected activities and exercises. As parents assist their youth with these activities, both parent and child will learn together while having fun.

The *K-3rd Grade Youth Curricula Evaluation* is a questionnaire consisting of 13 questions related to educational curricula content. It can be used as a guide for examining curricula to see if it meets the needs of youth, and the overall philosophy and objectives of the k-3rd grade youth program. Curricula for children 5-8 that promote and encourage the development of life skills and family interactions are the most effective. This is true because youth are in need of skill development that helps them feel secure in their environment and they desire interactions with their parents and other family members. Effective curricula will use the Experiential learning model, which includes the following five steps in a learning cycle:

- Experience — completing a hands-on activity
- Share — an opportunity to tell what happened
- Apply — an activity that allows use of learned skills

- Generalize — opportunities to connect activity to other situations
- Process — situations that stimulates, thinking and reflecting on the activity

Formative and Impact Evaluation Results

A pilot study of the *K-3rd Grade Program Guide* was conducted during the 1995 State Annual In-Service Training Conference in Raleigh, with 25 counties participating. The guides were described as helpful, practical, and useful in assisting county staffs in designing programs for children 5-8. All 4-H agents in each of North Carolina's 100 counties have been supplied copies of the *K-3rd Grade Program Guide*, the *K-3rd Grade Parent/Partner Guide*, and a set of the four project books and companion activity guides. As a result of North Carolina A&T Extension's leadership, training, and educational materials for the K-3rd grade youth, county staffs have recruited and involved over 20,000 volunteers, who have in turn served nearly 300,000 hours implementing programs for children 5-8. According to the 1998 and 1999 North Carolina Cooperative Extension reporting systems, all of the states' 100 counties have reported forming at least two 4-H clubs for children 5-8. During this time there were 323 new 4-H clubs formed for children in this age bracket. Of the 323 new clubs formed, more than 85 percent of the participants increased competencies in communication, self-confidence, and decision-making abilities. Additionally, youth have gained skills in using the experiential learning model and increased the quality and quantity of parent/youth interactions.

Life Skill Development

County staffs used two K-3rd Grade Youth program guides, four sets of curricula, a variety of programs, and activities to assist youth in developing life-skills, and to gain knowledge experientially. Life-skill development was in the areas of social interactions, decision-making, health and physical fitness, self-understanding, and learning to learn. Subjects for the curricula were insects, clothing and grooming, birds, and community resources. Through experiential exercises, activities, and strategies youth learned individually about insects: what they are, different types; how they grow and change; and where they live. In the clothing and grooming curriculum, they learn the importance of clothes, clothing in other cultures, clothing care, and storage. The birds curriculum helps youth learn birds' habitats, names, survival needs, and introduces them to bird-watching. The *Community Unity* curriculum discusses family life in communities, similarities and differences in communities, and why community rules are important.

Using the activity guides, parents and adult learning partners extended youth individual learning by conducting learning activities in group settings. Activities in the insect, clothing and grooming, birds, and community unity guides include a wide variety of experiences to help youth learn. The activity guide uses numerous strategies to facilitate learning, such as making paper butterflies, sorting clothing, exploring bird feathers, learning songs, role playing, and learning about community responsibilities. According to parents/partners who have utilized the curricula, they effectively assist children in becoming more competent in the day-to-day life-skill demands of their communities, and school and family environments.

Formative and Impact Evaluation Results

Prior to wide-scale introduction of the curricula, a pilot study was conducted using the K-3rd Grade Youth Program guides and curricula. It was conducted in North Carolina, involving four geographic regions of the state. A summary of the K-3rd Grade Youth Curriculum Evaluation form completed by parent/partners indicated that all activity guides provided background information, which set the stage for the learning activity. It was noted that the guides and project books provided opportunities for youth to use and explore each step of the experiential learning model. The curricula were described as very learner-oriented, with appropriate and relevant subject topics for the youth.

Learning by Experiencing

One of the main advantages of using the experiential learning model is that it helps youth to think critically and use a decision-making process that can be applied to many different situations. Youth have successfully learned and used the experiential learning model in activities, recreational play, and creative expressions. According to formative program evaluation completed by parent/partners using the *Experiential Behavior Checklist*, most of the youth had no trouble in experiencing, sharing, processing, generalizing, or application when learning new subjects. Youth gained new skills in following rules and directions, group dynamics, describing new experiences, making connections between activities and

real-life situations, relating activities to other experiences, and explaining what will be done in the future. Parents/partners reported that a few of the children 5 and 6 experienced some difficulty in processing new information; recalling if they had done anything similar to the activity before. This may be due to a lack of many experiences because of their young age. This will improve as they become more accustomed to using the experiential learning model and gain additional experiences.

Parent Interactions Increased in Quantity & Quality

The K-3rd Grade Youth individual mini-projects and group activity guides are designed to encourage and strengthen positive parent interactions through planned activities. K-3rd Grade Parent Interaction Evaluation Forms indicate that parental interaction with children increased as a result of using the K-3rd Grade youth guides and curricula. Parents reported that they have assisted their children in reading project goals, and completing checklists. Almost all parents that completed evaluations indicated that they extended their children's learning by assisting them in an average of nine additional child/parent fun things to do. (The list of child/parent fun things to do is included in each youth mini-project.) With the assistance of the K-3rd Grade curricula parents increased their interactions with their children an average of 2.2 hours per project.

In North Carolina and across the United States, children 5-8 represent the fastest growing market for 4-H program. But the developmental needs and behaviors of young children are very different than those of older children. These differing developmental needs require different types of evaluation tools. If educators are to recruit and retain youth in youth development at a time when they are beginning their group experience earlier in their lives, educational leaders need to acquire and use relevant methods for providing documentation of progress and learning.

References:

Beatty, W, (1975). **Improving Educational Assessment & An Inventory of Measures of Affective Behavior.** Washington, DC: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Bredenkamp, S., Cople, C., (1997). **Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs.** Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Brooks, D., Van Cleaf, D.,(1982). **Pupil Evaluation in the Classroom.** Lanham, New York, London: University Press of America.

Gullo, D., (1992). **Developmentally Appropriate Teaching in Early Childhood.** United States: National Education Association.

Helm, J., Beneke, S., Steinheimer, K.,(1998). **Windows on Learning.** New York and London: Teachers College, Columbia University.

Mustian, R., (2000). **Evaluation Guidebook.** Raleigh, NC: North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service.

Parkay, F., Stanford, B., (1995). **Becoming a Teacher.** Boston, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, Singapore: Allyn and Bacon.

Rouse, S., (1994). **K-3rd Grade Youth Program Guide.** Greensboro, NC: North Carolina A & T Cooperative Extension Program.

Schurr, S., (1992). **The ABC's of Evaluation.** Columbus, OH: National Middle School Association.

Swick, Kevin, (1991). **Teacher-Parent Partnerships to Enhance School Success in Early Childhood Education.** National Educational Association of the United States.