The Importance of Youth Voice in Planning Programs and Creating Policy

Mike Kosko

May 2022

Introduction:

Often, adults (whether it be legislators, agency executives, governing boards/commissions and even policy committees) plan and implement policy, programs and services, without involving youth in the process. Further, on occasions when youth are present at the table they are not participating as voting members thus diminishing the value of their representation.

> Probably the biggest issue for most of the youth I spent time with was finding a voice and being 'heard' by the experts and the professionals. A strong sense of the people 'in power' not understanding the real issues. A lot of anger and lack of trust of adults. (Youth delegate, 1994 Conference on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, cited in National Crime Prevention Strategy 1997)

This issue has been an identified problem for many years. Brunette et al. (1981) explains It has become increasingly apparent that all those who serve youth must work in a way that takes the feelings of youth into account, if they are to fully accomplish their purposes. By involving youth in the planning process, adults no longer need to make assumptions about how young people feel.

Answering that call, Youth to Youth International was established in 1982. The organization promotes a philosophy of programming that is Youth Led and Adult Guided. The Youth to Youth Program Model and philosophy operates to include rather than exclude resulting in better outcomes not only for the youth but the organization and greater community as well.

Failure to include youth can result in undesirable outcomes as put by Brunette et al. (1981) To exclude a portion of society from active involvement and participation tends to develop hostility, resentment, and alienation. Alienation leads to feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness. Often, this results in delinquent or antisocial behavior.

Miriam-Webster defines Youth as:

> a : the time of life when one is young
>
>> especially : the period between childhood and maturity
>
> b : the early period of existence, growth, or development

To clarify, moving forward, when referring to Youth, it will instead be defined by ages 14-20. The primary research evaluated to support the importance of youth voices included a wide range of ages from approximately 10 to 25 years, although most studies focused on high school aged youth (e.g., Ramey 2013).

Importance of a Resolution:

While everyone's experiences are different (positive, negative, neutral), youth involved in the system are our most valuable resource to evaluate and explore the direct impact of policy, programs and services. Not just to be surveyed for data, but also brought to the table to share their lived expertise to better tailor policy, programs and services that will actually meet the needs of youth involved. Incorporating just their input however does not resolve the issue altogether and active participation, including voting rights, promotes inclusivity and acknowledges that professionals (adults) do not have all the answers to youth issues.

In 2003 a study done by Lewis-Charp, Yu, Soukamnenuth & Lacoe found relevant changes in adult attitudes about marginalized or at-risk youth, such as greater awareness of youth's capacities. Further, during a 2008 study by Zeldin, Petrokubi & Camino relevant findings showed positive impacts on adult staff development, in the form of greater confidence and competence (especially with regard to gaining skills and attitudes that allow them to share power with youth), and generativity (in passing their experience on to a new generation) (e.g., Ramey 2013).

Clearly, the benefits of involving youth in all aspects of the process not only plays an important role for the youths' development but also impacts adult leadership as well as the organization/system in a positive way.

Action Plan:

Through my first stage or research, I was able to identify positive outcomes from EBP's, and will now move into my second stage of research, focusing on training programs to prepare youth for their increased involvement.

During this second stage of my research, I plan to simultaneously implement the following 2 projects:

Contact Manson Youth Institute

Connect with the Manson Youth City Council Coordinator about potential collaboration.

Take the opportunity to attend meetings, just to observe and better understand how the program is run.

Present my research to the Council

Discuss evaluation of the program, resulting in an evidence-based model (pending evaluation results)

Contact JJPOC Community Expertise Work Group

Look into the Work Group including development and accomplishments

Attend meetings

Support the groups identified needs with research from my capstone

I intend to work through my proposal with a Youth Driven, Adult Guided Lens. While I would like to follow the plan above, it is simply a starting point template for me and the Youth Voice should lead the plan from its conception. The goal is to empower/engage Youth, and to further layout a plan without

the consultation of Youth would be counterproductive. That said, a final step and goal, would be to create and institute a Youth Led Initiative modeled after the JJPOC.

Resources:

The main resources needed, will be contacts within the system. Making a connection with the JJPOC Community Expertise Work Group, as well as the Manson Youth City Council. Potential funding for evaluation of effectiveness would be required, if more creative collaborations could not be instituted. Currently, through many of our Session Presenters, and in speaking with other Cohort Members, I have been able to gain access to all the resources listed above.

Timeline:

This project is already underway. The Transforming Youth Justice Program builds each session to support our projects and the January Session will include a focus on research.

January: Conduct Stage One Research

February: Conduct Stage Two Research and continue to watch JJPOC Meetings (have already watched back meetings since September and need to connect to get Community Expertise Work Group specific information during the Research process)

March: Reach out to both Manson and JJPOC/Work Group to discuss the project and schedule to attend meetings

April-May: Attend meetings, present research and incorporate the Youth/Family voices into action steps and planning of the project.

June: Present the Capstone and continue to work through the process as it develops: Youth Driven, Adult Guided.

Sources

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