

Learning from lived experience in government care: Sharing gains in knowledge and practice in youth participation with key care stakeholders

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Abstract

Increasingly progressive organisations are changing how they see and work with young people. Such organisations as well as government are acknowledging the invaluable skills and insights young people with lived experiences can contribute as youth leaders, and genuine co-design partners shaping policy with key decision makers. This paper presents three care experienced perspectives on the benefits and challenges of capturing the voices of young people to inform policy and organisational decision-making in youth services. Sharing models of effective youth participation in policy development may lead to improved policy making and greater efficiency in child welfare service delivery. Encouraging young people's participation and empowerment involves a range of 'soft skills' that can be resource and time intensive. Sharing learning and knowledge from and about this work can be difficult as a result. The authors work on many innovative and important youth participation projects and seek to share young people's suggestions for how to facilitate meaningful participation for young people. Strategies for avoiding tokenism and increasing shared decision-making are discussed.

Keywords

Youth participation, care experienced, youth empowerment, advocacy;Article

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A number of organisations around the world work with children and young people with experiences of government care such as foster care, group homes or residential care and extended family and kin placements. Many children and young people growing up in care do not have the same access to opportunities as others in the community and often experience adverse outcomes (Mendes, Johnson and Moslehuddin, 2011). There is however, great commitment amongst care experienced children and young people to affect policy changes that can improve outcomes for people with care experiences. The authors have met with and learned from key organisations and policy actors supporting care experienced young people's participation in care policy improvements around the world. We have identified needs to support greater information sharing about local initiatives and efforts with world-wide audiences. The United Kingdom (UK) in particular has advanced collaborative efforts with #CareDay19 in February this year. The first author's meetings with Who Cares? Scotland and the Drive Forward Foundation in 2018 have been instructive in thinking about opportunities for Australia to learn from leaders in the field. In Victoria, Australia, there is significant youth-informed policy development work taking place. As a result, momentum is building for further work in this field. Building an evidence base regarding the impact of youth participation requires greater attention to be paid to the evaluation of discrete initiatives taking place across the community sector. With an improved evidence base, more and more organisations can have access to information about how to embed youth participation in their own policies and practice.

The growth of children's rights recognition and youth participation

In Australia, the national consumer body representing children and young people with a care experience, the CREATE Foundation, is celebrating 20 years of learning from lived experience in government care (CREATE Foundation, 2019). The organisation has contributed to significant improvements in the out-of-home care (OOHC) system in Australia including the establishment of a National Children's Commissioner and the National Standards for Out-of-Home Care (CREATE Foundation, 2019). The rights of children and young people to have

their voices heard by key policy and decision makers are becoming more widely supported (see Crofts, Beadle, Cahill, & Romei, 2017; Oliver, 2016). Increasing numbers of youth advisory groups are being set up in organisations providing services to children and young people in the state of Victoria in Australia. Around the world, many organisations exist to support young people's participation in services that support them. Many organisations work specifically with children and young people who have been in the care of the government to advocate for the improvement of such services.

This year, organisations from the UK, Ireland, New Zealand and Australia, collaborated on a campaign for Care Day to raise awareness of this work internationally, social media campaigns were collated on a dedicated website (<https://careday.ie/>) to celebrate and acknowledge those who had been in government care. These organisations are specialised in supportive youth participation work with care experienced children and young people. There are a number of other organisations initiating their own care experienced youth participation policy and advocacy groups with different approaches and objectives.

Youth participation and empowerment has been included in state regulations for services to children and young people through the Child Safe Standards in Victoria, which were developed to ensure that community groups and youth services are safe places for children and young people (Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). There is little direction within these guidelines about how different organisations should enact youth empowerment and participation in practice. Despite taking the position of empowering youth to participate, when new groups are developed, they may encounter barriers to providing opportunities for young people's advocacy due to the lack of specificity in the guidelines as to how to enact these opportunities. Though support for youth participation is growing, barriers to participation exist and can slow or limit progress in young peoples' voices being heard. Greater information sharing between organisations supporting youth participation could allow young people's voices to be heard by key decision makers and inform policy-making improvements more quickly.

This paper is designed to offer greater specificity in how young people's voices can be heard, as told by the care experienced young people who are involved in various youth participation initiatives.

Sharing participation practice wisdom

Over many years in Melbourne, Victoria, numerous youth advisory groups have developed in relation to OOHC and youth services. The CREATE Foundation has been showcasing some of this work in Victoria through bi-annual youth-led forums that invite Young Consultants (who are care experienced youth, or currently in OOHC) from CREATE and youth advocates from other organisations to present their recommendations for service improvements directly to government ministers and Child Safety and Child Protection leadership. This unique forum, called the Hour of Power (HOP), attracts commentary on Twitter from key decision makers and has been credited with influencing key political decisions around care policy and child safety inquiries (see CREATE Foundation, 2018).

Favourable conditions for youth participation from care experienced perspectives

To develop this reflective paper the authors sought contributions from various youth leadership groups. Youth advocacy groups and organisations that support these groups, are typically very busy, however. Ralph Salera was able to support Jarrad Butcher and Annie, representatives from the Salvation Army's former Westcare service's The Youth Group Advocates (TYGA), to share about their experiences working as Youth Participation Champions.

The following section provides the words of care experienced young people on issues around youth participation and empowerment. For the purposes of this article, these excerpts are provided interview-style, rather than grouped as themes with the intent that the young people speak for themselves, rather than interpretations being made as to what they are saying.

Why are you passionate about youth participation and empowerment?

I am passionate about youth having the ability to have self-determination and participate in their community in order to enable them to represent their interests in a responsible way, acting on their own authority. This will enable youth to become stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one's life and claiming one's right[s] (Jarrad).

I have spent some of my teenage years in government care and now reflecting on this experience, I can see the importance of having a system that intends to provide for young people that has had these same young people aid the development. Youth-led decision-making practices are crucial to ensure that power is given back to those who are accessing services to provide a more balanced service delivery. As someone who has lived part of their life in government care, I can recognise how much power and decision making was taken away from me. My passions lie in ensuring that this power is returned to all young people (Annie).

What has been your journey and your organisation's journey with youth participation and empowerment?

The Youth Group Advocates (TYGA) began small with the simple idea of exceeding tokenistic participation. Salvation Army and TYGA worked hard to be recognised and demonstrate a more meaningful way to engage young people in service delivery. We aided in the hiring of new staff members, the TYGA team sat with a different perspective of what qualities were desired in a candidate and worked together with [staff] Ralph and Alyce to reach a final decision (Annie).

I have been involved with Salvation Army (former service) Westcare in The Youth Group Advocates (TYGA) advocating for

young people in care by attending conferences and sharing my out of home care experiences. Along the way I have learnt to be self-confident and learnt to have self-determination. Myself and everyone in this group have been a positive influence for change for young people in out-of-home care (Jarrad).

Where do you see youth participation and youth empowerment efforts heading in the future?

Young people who have had a care experience have the chance to give back through the TYGA program when they transition from care after the age of 18 into independency. They will be able to advocate with other like-minded young people who have also had an out-of-home care experience to move into the future where all young people feel empowered and can have the best care system and also be heard (Jarrad).

Ideally, I would love to see all organisations having dedicated youth advocacy groups that they can turn to, to aid in the development of policies and procedures, hiring new staff, being a part of representing the organisation, being given opportunities to reach state and national decision makers, that can engage with other young people in the service (mentoring) and any all other forms of inclusive practices (Annie).

What are the benefits you've seen and experienced for your organization, staff and young people involved?

The most significant advantages and benefits have been the valuable opinions of young people who have experienced living in the industry alongside the professional expertise of managers and support workers at (the former service) Westcare. The recognition of TYGA's objectives and methods as being a great form of empowerment and participation that can be duplicated within other organisations. TYGA have been very proactive and

have met with the National commissioner for young people to put forth our suggestions, knowledge and recommendations (Annie).

What learnings and advice do you have for others in creating more youth participation and empowerment opportunities?

The first step would be to determine the specific need for youth participation, in other words: What do you envision being the ultimate outcome and benefit to practice/service delivery? Next, make the active commitment to having face to face contact with young people to get guidance on what needs to be done and how to get it done. I think most organisations engage young people on what needs to change but the crucial difference is devising creative and practical solutions to promote change (Annie).

What needs to change in current youth participation practice?

Tokenistic participation: young people need to be given the opportunity to actively engage within the organisation.

There are many things within the Social industry that could use improvement. Every industry, service and organisation will have different strengths and weaknesses. It is impossible to give a comprehensive description of everything that needs to change but I believe the first step of identifying what needs to change in any specific context is to get the opinions of the young people who have experienced the service and to continue to create this space for participation constantly. One-off forms of participation give little to no accountability or power to the organisation or the young people involved (Annie).

Victorian Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (CFECFW) Young Leader, Brittany Witnish, also contributed some thoughts on providing supportive environments for young people's participation. Brittany has experience conducting her own youth consultation with the Youth Affairs Council

Victoria (YACVic) as a 'Young thinker in residence' conducting a project on young people transitioning from care in Victoria, Australia (Witnish, 2017). Ms Witnish works currently with the CFECFW as a care experienced Young Leader on policy, advocacy, and campaigning projects (CFECFW, 2019). Ms Witnish has been involved in doing similar work for many organisations in a range of settings and shared some perspectives on how organisations can work with young people in these arenas. The following is an edited excerpt of Ms Witnish's perspective regarding good practice in supporting youth participation and empowerment.

Recognition of care experienced young people's capabilities

Care experienced young people who are experienced in leadership and advocacy have detailed subject knowledge of youth and care services, usually with a range of well-informed opinions on the topic of youth participation and youth engagement. Young people therefore appreciate it when they are treated as capable and knowledgeable people that practitioners can learn many good practice tips from. Young people with a care experience have often had many decisions made for them in life, so when these young people are now engaged for youth participation projects and work, they expect to be treated with the same respect and regard as professionals. Directive, highly structured activities that stifle open discussion and information sharing between young people, who may be working together for the first time, can be perceived as condescending. When working together in forums and similar events with youth services practitioners and management, young people behave in a professional manner and expect the same of others. Often young people will be grouped together as the 'youth' voice, for example, which can make young people feel their contributions are being regarded as 'less than' than the contributions of those practitioners and professionals present.

Safe spaces for consultation

Many organisations attempting to improve their youth participation processes will try to establish and maintain a youth-friendly and 'safe' space for young

people. This is important with care experienced young people who may have been engaged to share aspects of traumatic life experiences for others to learn from. It is important that young people feel comfortable to speak and contribute. For young people who are experienced in advocacy and policy work, they may already feel comfortable in a forum environment working collaboratively with youth services professionals. Attempts to make them feel 'extra' comfortable by having different roles for 'young people' and professionals may be seen as again, not valuing young people's contributions as highly as those of 'professionals'. It is helpful in these situations to learn about young people's capabilities and experiences in advocacy and policy work to ensure a young person's skill sets and expertise can be best utilised. When young people are recruited for policy and advocacy work through organisations already working in this space, it is likely they have been supported and prepared to do this work, and indeed they may have been doing it for years already.

Conclusion

Just as young people with a care experience are a heterogeneous group, approaches to youth participation can take many forms. The young people here, who are a particularly articulate group of care-experienced youth, have highlighted a number of important elements to youth empowerment and participation. They include: needing to provide a genuine forum that allows for accountability by the organisation to implement perspectives of young people, providing opportunities for young people to participate in a manner that is seen as equal to that of professionals that gives an authentic and genuine sense that young people's participation and perspectives matter, and allowing the voices of young people to be heard on many levels of the organisation from hiring to policy development.

Growing opportunities for care experienced young people to use their skills and knowledge to help inform key decision makers' thinking and policy action, appears to be developing. Young people have much to contribute in identifying ways for care systems to improve. Developing further information sharing avenues for discussion about youth participation and advocacy in practice, as well as more networking opportunities for those young people and community

sector staff engaged in this work, is likely to assist with capacity building for organisations with less experience in the field of youth participation and empowerment.

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