

Overcoming the isolating impact of COVID-19 by promoting young people's participation in residential care programmes

Authors

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Abstract

The devastating international health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is reported on a daily basis in terms of newly acquired infections and mortality rates. What is less visible are the social and emotional implications of the virus, in particular the impact of requirements to remain socially isolated and in some circumstances to self-isolate or self-quarantine for periods of time. Young people living in residential care are already highly vulnerable having been removed from home and placed in group care. They often lack positive mentors and role models and have few healthy peer relationships. In short, young people who are already socially isolated are potentially further disadvantaged by requirements for them to practise social distancing and self-isolation. This paper examines contemporary literature promoting the participation of young people in programmes and organisations. Whilst 'participation' has been a longstanding international requirement for young people in the out of home care system, we argue that it has particular relevance in these times and may offer an opportunity for young people's lived experience to be recognised and valued.

Keywords

COVID-19, young people, participation, social isolation, Australia

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Introduction

The COVID-19 global pandemic has had and continues to have far reaching implications across the world. In the absence of a vaccine to combat the spread of the virus, a major public health response has been to prevent transmission by minimising human to human contact. At the interpersonal level, this may involve wearing a facemask in public and remaining at a 1.5 metre distance (2 metres in some countries) from other people or more dramatically, being placed in quarantine or required to self-isolate for specified periods of time. These self-isolating behaviours, whilst protecting young people in residential care from contracting the virus, have the potential to further isolate and exacerbate the vulnerability of this already highly vulnerable population. Social distancing in this context can be seen as the antithesis of the healthy social connection that young people in residential care need (McPherson et al., 2019; Vosz et al., 2020a).

What follows is an examination of contemporary literature suggesting different ways organisations can promote young people's participation, as a means of valuing their lived experience and demonstrating a willingness to hear their views. Ways in which young people can be involved in the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes, leadership and governance are explored as are organisational cultures and planning that may strategically work to overcome the social isolation associated with COVID-19.

Involving young people in programmes and organisations

Current research looking at young people's participation offers some great insights into the value of young people's participation, not just in day to day decisions that affect their own lives, but more strategically at programme development, organisational and institutional levels (Imanian and Thomas, 2020; Lansdown and O'Kane, 2014; Tisdall, 2017). Involvement in organisations ranges from individual to collective participation, and may include

programme/project design, development and evaluation, direction and oversight (Vosz et al., 2020a).

Involving young people in residential care in organisational decision-making can achieve innovation, improved outcomes and care plans that better reflect young people's preferences (Moore et al., 2018; Davis, 2019; Dixon, Ward and Blower, 2019). Partnering with young people in co-production and co-design of new programmes, such as aftercare and transition programmes of support, can benefit organisations through creating new service types and offerings that address young people's concerns (Reed, 2016; NSW Advocate for Children and Young People, 2019; Purtell et al., 2019)

Recognising young people's lived experience expertise

Research suggests that the first step involves recognising that young people in residential care have knowledge and experience about services, policies and modes of care - what works, and what doesn't work for them (Vosz et al. 2020b). They may have ideas about how practices and systems need to improve to achieve better outcomes, or they may want to talk about the practices that are ineffective and disempowering. But many young people have also heard the rhetoric of participation without seeing authentic practice (Tisdall, 2017; Sinclair, Vieira and Zufelt, 2019).

Lived experience is the source of experience-based knowledge in human-centred organisations that can be harnessed in design and development (Lansdown, 2011; Dixon, Ward and Blower, 2019). Seeing lived experience as expertise is a way to learn about young people, what they value, and what kinds of practices and relationships hold credibility with them. Practitioners and managers need to show respect and be accountable to young people, genuinely considering their views to avoid participation becoming a 'smokescreen for inaction and an illusion of empowerment' (Percy-Smith and Thomas, 2014, p. 2). When young people are respected in an organisation, their experience and knowledge will be valued, their rights to participate will be realised, and power will be shared more equally (Thomas, 2012).

Young people should not need to share all the details of their lives to be taken seriously. But they may want to share aspects of their stories to help adults understand their experiences, insights and preferences. For this reason, they should be supported to make careful decisions about what aspects of their lived experience they wish to share, and to protect themselves from difficult questions, dismissive or exploitative behaviour of others (Graham et al., 2013). In Australia, [CREATE Foundation](#) and [AbSec](#) provide capacity building and opportunities for young people in care to contribute to organisational decision-making and governance.

Planning for organisational participation

Vulnerability, social accountability and co-production should each be considered when planning the participation of young people who have experienced the child protection system, according to Tisdall (2017):

Vulnerability

Adults are obliged to protect young people in care, to restore their autonomy through relationships of respect, and to build their capabilities for participation. But when we focus on young people as 'at risk', we fail to address power imbalances, positioning them as 'works in progress' rather than citizens. Protecting young people in care from COVID-19 presents additional challenges to organisations seeking dialogue with young people to use strategies that address power imbalances and enhance their agency.

Social accountability

Adults are obliged to ensure equitable participation of young people in care, particularly those who are overrepresented or marginalised in the care system, and to be responsible for their actions and commitments to young people. This includes giving due consideration to their views in decision making and demonstrating the influence of their views on outcomes. Organisations need to build young people's capacities to participate, establish mechanisms to

effectively hold leaders to account. However, where organisations use an intermediary to engage with young people, the intermediary may become a 'proxy' for their views at the decision making 'table' (Tisdall, 2017).

Co-production and co-design

Here young people are involved in a reciprocal and equal relationship with other stakeholders such as senior managers, funding bodies, academics or other experts, in the design of programmes and projects, from the beginning. They are deeply embedded, from empathy and ideation to prototyping, scaling and review. Here young people's expertise, agency and decision-making capabilities on individual and collective levels are recognised, valued and incorporated in the process. If it is not delivered authentically, co-production, may be used to shore-up the priorities of powerful stakeholders (Tisdall, 2017).

Organisations should consider their readiness and commitment to listening and sharing power with young people (Shier, 2001), including the resources provided to support young people in forming and expressing their views (including space, time, food and transport), the commitment of senior decision makers to listening directly to young people, and the influence they will make to the outcomes you want to achieve (Lundy, 2007).

Young people's participation in organisational decision making

Participation may take the form of individual and group feedback about the quality of service, consultation ideas about new services and programmes they would like to see, informal and formal evaluation of projects, services and the whole organisation, and even organisational governance, such as youth representative positions on a board of managers, youth advisory groups that provide ongoing advice to organisations, 'thinkers in residence', and youth reference groups that direct the development of new events or projects. Figure 1

below represents some of these different modes of involvement, and their proximity to organisational decision-making.



Figure 1: Modes of participation and organisational decision making

Organisations can benefit from drawing on young people's lived experience in the development of procedures, documents and policies, that reflect their concerns, culture, and interests (Calheiros, Patricio and Graca, 2013; McDowall, 2016). Young people can help to craft a message that makes sense, helping the organisation to communicate effectively with other young people. This involves planning, dedicated staffing and programme resources, capacity building, and commitment to follow through on their contributions. Youth consultants should be provided with feedback, their expertise should be remunerated, and they should be able to see the impact they made on the final product. Purtell (2019) also notes the importance of opportunities for young people to influence change

in a variety of forums and at different levels within the organisation, rather than one-off approaches. Young people's involvement in this way can support the development of cultures of reciprocity, collaboration and improved relationships between staff, managers and young people (Dixon et al., 2019).

Young people's involvement in programme and service design

Organisations may choose to involve young people in program design, delivery and evaluation, either using co-production or other forms of engagement. Young people's involvement in evaluation, co-research and peer review can also enhance organisational evaluation, and enhance dialogue with decision-makers (Dixon, Ward and Blower, 2019; Imanian and Thomas, 2020). Collaborative needs assessment and asset mapping, including place-based engagement, can benefit from young people's expertise in identifying problems and strengths, describing the barriers they experience as place- and service-users, and identifying solutions that will have meaning for them. Young people may find it challenging to open up in forums, so it is important to build provide a range of participation options including youth-led and shared adult-youth activities. Organisations can build young people's trust by listening, meeting them at the 'decision-making table' and taking young people's views seriously in sustained relationships over time.

Youth-inclusive programme design may involve co-production and co-design or may only engage young people in certain stages of the development process. Methods include youth and community steering groups, including young people in the programme design team, involving young people who are peer workers and peer mentors to link to other young people (Purtell et al., 2019). Youth participatory action research is a method where young people who are most affected by a social issue or problem form together with facilitation and support to learn about the problem, plan and take action, and create social change over time (Dixon et al., 2019).

Where young people are involved alongside other key stakeholders in design and decision making, existing decision-making processes and spaces should be made youth friendly, inclusive and accessible. This could involve moving into young people's spaces, such as a local park, or might involve bringing young people into executive spaces like board rooms. Remuneration of young people is important, so that their expertise is valued on an equal footing to other paid staff and executive members. In a recent study in Australia, evidence was found that remuneration does not put undue influence on young people to participate (Taplin et al., 2019).

Young people's involvement in organisational decision making and governance

Youth advisory groups and representative board positions are increasingly seen as industry-standard practices (Schoenfeld et al., 2019). Young people may benefit from mentoring to support their involvement in organisational management (including staff recruitment), strategic planning, and business development. Where only a small number of young people are involved as 'representatives' on boards and decision-making groups with other adults, they should be supported and resourced to undertake this role. Similarly, training and capacity building should be provided to young people who take on other special roles, as facilitators, co-researchers, reviewers and leaders (Lansdown, 2019).

Youth advisory groups are one way to build participation in organisational governance that is additional to existing structures of decision-making and involves ongoing advice to senior managers and leaders. The relationship between a youth advisory groups and senior decision makers should be clarified, so that young people know from the outset what level of accountability they can expect. Youth advisory group members can be expected to draw on their lived experience knowledge in decision-making processes that are accessible, inclusive and youth friendly.

Conclusion

The literature relating to young people's engagement in organisations, programme design and evaluation suggests myriad techniques for achieving meaningful participation in residential care. The benefits of participation that is accountable to young people, supports their capabilities and agency, and recognises their contributions, accrue to both young people, staff and organisations, as their lived experience provides a wealth of expertise to guide organisational adaptation. Meaningful participation is also an opportunity for organisations seeking to re-design therapeutic care programme design, organisational cultures and governance in response to COVID-19 health and social restrictions, in ways that counter the negative implications of social isolation. We now understand that COVID-19 is here to stay, and young people can be active partners to staff and managers as we seek to adapt service provision and models of care. Organisations should seek to value young people's lived experience, and consider the ways they will collaborate with young people in authentic, respectful relationships that enable dialogue and reciprocity. Further research is needed to identify, from the perspective of young people themselves, the processes and models of participation that are most effective for them.

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