New Voices

Y-Change: Young People as Experts and Collaborators

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the socio-political and environmental advocacy sectors have seen the emergence of a number of highly respected, youth-founded and -driven organisations pushing for action across Australia and internationally. This article will showcase Y-Change, the Berry Street Childhood Institute's youth leadership and social change pilot project, which aims to empower and enable young people who have experienced disadvantage to add their largely absent voices and weight to this movement of young change-makers. Incorporating trauma informed and transformational identity approaches in its design, Y-Change will train young people in key leadership skills and offer paid opportunities to utilize those skills, through activities internally and externally to Berry Street. Y-Change is based on a belief that the expertise young people develop through their experiences of disadvantage should hold equal weight with that of professionals and academics especially when seeking to identify and address systemic issues to which they may have been subject. The Berry Street Childhood Institute responds on a national scale to the complex social issues that impact on children's experience of childhood in Australia. By elevating the expertise of young people in this context Y-Change also elevates the critical voices of young people who have experienced disadvantage in processes of change.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is an exciting time to be a young person, as long as you are not experiencing disadvantage or marginalisation. Y-Change understands the term "disadvantaged" as describing an experience or a circumstance, not a person. If you're experiencing homelessness, care, cycles of substance abuse or any number of other circumstances that separate you from "mainstream" life, you will face barriers to fundamental human rights and opportunities available to most of your peers (Jansen, 2010). Young people who are experiencing (or have experienced) disadvantageous life circumstances are likely to face barriers to education, employment, and "normal" adolescent development. Limited opportunities to achieve or succeed (in the traditional senses), means that many have little understanding or vision of their own potential (West, Day, Somers, & Baroni, 2014). What they *do* possess are skills gained as a result of negotiating their way through a range of challenging (and in some cases life threatening) experiences and relationships. Although skills and knowledge that contribute to this expertise do not make up for the damage done by traumatic experiences, their value should not be underestimated both in relation to healing strategies for the young person themselves and the potential for influencing change within a struggling support sector. With first-hand understanding of life lived within those support systems – experiencing homelessness, addiction, violence, the care system, incarceration – young people have often had to develop an understanding of the way in which disconnected systems inter-relate and operate. This is an adaptive function young people are forced to cultivate to make sure that they get what they need to survive.

Experiences of disadvantage are chronically disempowering. The very term "disadvantage" tells a young person that success will be a much harder road for them than others. Labels like "homeless", "junkie", "kid in care", and "criminal" all carry the weight of disempowerment by virtue of their ability to define a person's identity (Humphreys & Kertesz, 2015). If, however, we recognise that identity is constructed and that "we are who we play ourselves to be" (Cahill, Coffey, & Beadle, 2015, p. 305) then it becomes clear that their lack of representation at the decision-making table or the front of the young entrepreneurial "pack" in the 21st century is not due to a lack of potential among these cohorts. Y-Change engages young people who have experienced disadvantage in a 12-month program, using a training and employment framework to undertake transformational identity work in the safe context of a trauma-informed model.

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON YOUNG PEOPLE AND LEARNING

Research into the long-term adverse effects of childhood trauma has been conducted over the last 30 years with the majority of earlier research exploring trauma experiences in adulthood (Teicher et al., cited in Kirouac, 2009). Moreover, recent research has established that childhood trauma has considerable impact on the cognitive, social, emotional, behavioural, and physical functions of young people (Perry, 2009; Wylie, 2012). As recovery from trauma in childhood does not take place in isolation and is contingent upon the empowerment and the formation of new social connections of the survivor (Bloom, 1995; Perry, 2007). For facilitators of the Y-Change program, understanding the complexities of trauma can aid in seeing beyond disturbed behaviours, creating connections and diffusing conflict. Change for these young people will come more easily if the focus is not on behaviour-

management strategies, but rather on building connections, trust and stable relationships with significant adults (Downey, 2007; Fecser, 2015; Hall & Souers, 2015).

"TRAUMA-INFORMED" RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS

Being trauma-informed is not about treating symptoms related to trauma, but rather, it is about being informed and sensitive to issues associated with trauma that may be present in survivors (Jennings, 2004). Significant research and trauma-informed models began to emerge in the mid-1990s. Notably, Bruce Perry's work and the establishment of the Child Trauma Academy continue to inform much of what we know about trauma-informed practice (Kirouac, 2009). Sandra Bloom's "Creating Sanctuary" in 1995 was significant in bringing trauma-informed practice into the classroom (Bloom, 1995, pp. 403–433). In Australia there have been several important publications by the Victorian Government (Downey, 2007) and the Australian Childhood Foundation (2010), which provide an infrastructure and flexible framework for schools and teaching staff working with traumatised young people. The Berry Street Childhood Institute has developed the "Berry Street Education Model: Curriculum and Classroom Strategies" which is currently being delivered across all Berry Street Schools (Brunzell, Norrish, Ralston, & Witter, 2015). Included in this model are de-escalation classroom strategies, step-by-step guides for students to "get present, centred and grounded", suggested lesson plans, co-regulation and self-regulation tools for teachers (Brunzell, Norrish, Ralston, & Witter, 2015, pp. 25–77).

THEORY INTO PRACTICE: INCORPORATING A TRAUMA-INFORMED PHILOSOPHY INTO Y-CHANGE

The focus of each model explores the teacher–student relationship in teaching young people to self-regulate. The Y-Change program and learner guides focus on the self-regulatory model by utilizing the facilitator–participant relationship to better understand the motives behind the behaviour and to model appropriate behaviours (Hall & Souers, 2015). This relationship-based approach is consistent with multiple models (Bloom, 1995; Brunzell et al., 2015; Downey, 2007; Massachusetts Advocates for Children, 2005). The Y-Change model took into consideration the theory behind self-regulation; diffusing conflict, creating connections and planning for challenging incidents. The link between the theory and practice was further built into lesson plans for educators. For example, by acknowledging trauma's impact on the body, on the stress response and on learning; specifically helping students to self-regulate to a heartbeat of 80 beats per minute (Brunzell et al., 2015).

THE Y-CHANGE PROJECT

Berry Street and the Berry Street Childhood Institute (BSCI) endeavour to work alongside young people as experts to drive social change and improve childhood for children and young people. Berry Street has almost 140 years of history delivering services to Victoria's most vulnerable children, young people and families. The BSCI was established with the aim of contributing to Berry Street's vision that all children should have a good childhood by collaboratively building and sharing knowledge, encouraging public dialogue and mobilising leadership. Berry Street receives 90% of its funding from the state and federal governments. The remaining 10% is sought through independent sources (e.g., trusts,

foundations, donors). It is independent funding that allows for programs like Y-Change to be developed and run.

The program builds on the existing trauma-informed curriculum to empower young people to take large strides in their journey through life and to utilise the skills they have learned to survive to lead change, not only in their lives, but those of others. Systemic advocacy is a driving objective behind the project, however; Y-Change is also about individual empowerment and self-determination. This is a transformational program, encouraging and facilitating a process for young people to shift their identity from those limiting labels through to leader, advocate and change-maker. To these ends, in parallel with the training and employment, and throughout the 12-month program, the young people receive one-to-one supervision as well as coming together regularly as a team to explore concepts of identity, empowerment and character strengths. These meetings and sessions engage the young people in reflective practice and a range of positive psychology and character strength exercises aimed at exploring their experiences, their emerging motivations, their challenges and strategies for their personal growth. The skills young people learn with the program are those they can use to define their own agendas, passions, life goals and plans. Through Y-Change up to 15 young people are given training and paid work experience that recognises, reinforces, extends and channels their skills and expertise so that they can realise their own potential and, ultimately, make more informed decisions about their own lives.

The training program runs for 12 weeks, combining class time, guest speakers, interactive workshops, reflections and externally provided training opportunities. The course covers public speaking, group facilitation, media skills, and skills relating to campaigning and activism. Subsequently, participants are offered a nine-month casual employment contract with Berry Street. They engage in a range of projects, events and initiatives through which they can combine and exercise their newly focused skills. Opportunities are assigned according to expertise and interest, reinforcing the strengths and capabilities of individual young people. Campaigning and activism skills are fostered through a collaborative project over the 12 months. The group collectively develops a campaign around an issue that concerns them and they are supported to implement that campaign together.

EVALUATION AND MEASUREMENT

An evaluation strategy for Y-Change is currently under development with Melbourne University's Youth Research Centre. The evaluation will focus on participants' skill, knowledge, and personal development across the pilot. It will also explore the organisational and systemic impact of increased engagement with, and value for, the expertise of young people. Further-more, it will engage participants in a series of co-creation workshops that will give them free rein to redesign the program for the long term according to their experiences and subsequent expertise regarding what works and what does not.

CONCLUSION

It is important to note that, even having achieved apparent stability and strength, young people who have experienced disadvantage can, like many people, find themselves destabilized by unforeseen or challenging events (Bessant & Broadly, 2014). Situating Y-Change within

Berry Street and the Berry Street Childhood Institute offers a safe, supported context through which participants can recreate their identity by testing their skills and ideas, cognisant of who they have become. They can have confidence that, if they hit a bump in the road or they fall down along the way, they have the skills and understanding to navigate the challenges without judgment. By bringing together young people with diverse experiences of disadvantage in a supported context, Y-Change hopes to take the power out of labels like "homeless", "in care", "addict" and other disempowering categorisations. Instead the focus can shift to the power that comes from young people's lived experience. Empowerment and the development of capability can offer young people a bridge from their disadvantaged experiences to a level playing field with their peers. Some will use the newfound skills and confidence to change their own world. Others might use them to change ours.

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