

Reflections on Community Building: Integrating Voices from Youth-Adult Collaboration

Stream - Youth-adult Partnerships

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Abstract

Children and youth are disproportionately impacted by global and local injustices. They are also more educated and more technologically savvy than their predecessors, but they are also more challenged by a nexus of socioeconomic factors within an increasingly shrinking world.

Research posits that youth-adult partnerships for youth related programs lead to better outcomes for youth and for communities that embark on such strategies. Drawing on case study research, this paper synthesizes lessons from youth-involved or youth-led initiatives that collectively add to the discourse on youth-adult collaborations. These cases include: child protection and peace building in the conflict and post-conflict states of Burundi, Chad and Mali; youth input into curriculum content and democracy building in Canada; young people involved in prostitution defining 'success' for interventions attempting to support them in Canada, Australia and UK; and an indigenous youth leadership program in Canada.

Keywords

youth-adult collaboration; community building; participation

Introduction

Having witnessed significant shifts in demographics, communication habits and employment culture, youth are at a crossroads. Youth are more educated and more technologically savvy than their predecessors, but they are also more challenged by this nexus of socioeconomic factors within an increasingly shrinking world. This manifests differently in different parts of the world, but similar patterns persist and the reality of the lives of youth today are distinct enough from the preceding generations that they require youth-adult collaboration to bridge that divide and to ensure mutually beneficial outcomes. Research posits that youth-adult partnerships for youth related programs lead to better outcomes for youth and for communities that embark on such strategies.

Despite this, youth-led or youth-informed programs, practices and policies still appear to be considered novel or on the periphery. Given these concurrent realities, this paper argues that we need to endorse actions that illustrate youth-adult partnerships as a mainstream approach rather than a tokenistic ‘add on’. Drawing on case studies, this paper synthesizes lessons from case examples of youth-involved or youth-led initiatives that collectively add to the discourse on youth-adult collaboration. Each case shows youth grappling with their world. These projects include: child protection and peace building in the conflict and post-conflict states of Burundi, Chad and Mali; youth input into curriculum content and democracy building in Canada; young people involved in prostitution defining ‘success’ for interventions attempting to support them in Canada, Australia and UK; and an indigenous youth leadership program in Canada.

Youth thrive when given the opportunity to engage and show leadership (Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson, 2014), particularly when they blend creativity and intentionality and co-creation with adults. This is good for the individual, but also for the community of interest. This is equally the case in Canada, as it is in Africa. Ideally this is fostered in childhood and developed in youth. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child cements the global commitment to ensuring children and youth are able to be engaged in dialogue and have their voice heard in decisions that affect them.

Methods

This paper is based on a qualitative case study analysis capturing the findings of several current projects in various stages of completion. This paper draws on insights from the researchers across projects, rather than on the individual research findings from each project.

These projects are connected to youth leadership, youth voice and input into policy or youth peace building. By chronicling the key processes and outcomes of these distinct projects in different contexts, an exploration of youth involvement in furthering youth-adult collaboration is explored.

Findings

This short paper draws on four case studies.

1. Post conflict child protection and peace building (Chad, Burundi and Mali)- Using child protection and child-centred participatory processes, key community stakeholders came together in several communities in Chad and Burundi to consolidate peace building across the communities. This is currently being replicated in Mali. Preliminary findings illustrate an appetite for trialing processes that simultaneously protect children and use this process to build community resilience. This research posits that the work with, and for, children is the community catalyst for change (Personal communication, 2016).

2. Young people involved in prostitution defining ‘success’ for themselves (UK, Australia & Canada)- Based on a study from 2006, this research asked young people involved in prostitution, as well as their advocates and service providers, to define what ‘success’ was and to explore their perceptions of effectiveness of intervention strategies in Canada, the UK and Australia. By giving voice to marginalized girls about their expectations and ambitions for the services that were working on their behalf, space was made to open a dialogue on the underlying assumptions about what was needed. In retrospect, the research illustrated a fundamental mismatch between what was needed by youth themselves and what was offered. It also provided a vehicle for young people to provide input to a wider range of stakeholders on what their needs were. Sexually exploited youth lack homogeneity and it is their very diversity that demand youth-adult partnerships that open dialogue on what structures can be erected to support space for fulfilling ‘success’. This research found that services (and adults) must embrace complexity and rise to the challenge of addressing multiple individual and social issues (Manion, 2016). A key finding was that services are more robust when they support youth to advocate for interventions that meet their needs.

3. Citizens’ Assembly: Pilot Study (Victoria, Canada)- This project tested a democracy-building process which helps average citizens engage in political decision making. The Citizen’s Assembly process allows participants to study an issue in depth, then give recommendations to

government on issues that they are passionate about. In this pilot, the citizens in question were grade twelve students in a local high school social justice class. Using this process, high school students decided to give concrete recommendations to the British Columbia (BC) provincial government regarding what they deemed to be inadequacies in sexual education from kindergarten to grade twelve. The process gave them unprecedented access to experts in the field, public servants and elected officials to gather evidence and to test their recommendations before formally lodging their recommendations with the government. The preliminary findings indicate that when youth are highly interested in thinking through policy ideas that impact them and they have an aptitude for making intelligent and relevant policy recommendations. The students subsequently decided to take their issues to traditional and social media and continue working towards the change they are seeking. They also want to pass the torch to the students in the next year (Personal communication, 2016).

4. Aboriginal Youth Leadership- This project, led by the International Institute of Child Rights and Development, aims to support aboriginal youth to develop practical skills to be youth leaders, traditional skill builders, knowledge sharers and community engagers. It does this through a series of course based learning that build core competencies in self awareness, evidence based knowledge, relevant leadership skills, strategies and approaches for accountable action. By focusing on the guiding principles of leading with children, starting from strengths, building partnerships, working from the ‘inside out’, and using the power of ideas, the training process supports grass roots, adaptable leadership training for young people to build their own initiatives in their own communities. Advanced training includes a train-the-trainers curricula. Initial findings suggest that youth are hungry for this kind of opportunity and welcome the options to learn about and build youth-adult collaborations (Personal communication, 2016).

Argument

These disparate projects are distinct and cover different populations, contexts, platforms, points of time and levels of completion, but they highlight emerging areas of practice and possibility. They illustrate ways of working with youth to support them to define what is important to them and to best support them to amplify their voice and leverage for the change they seek. Conversely, they illustrate the power and impact of including youth-adult collaborations for the youth, the adult and their respective communities. The idea of asking stakeholders what they feel is important is such an obvious idea, but it is still, in many circles,

ignored. The participatory processes involved in these four case examples are not new ideas, but they still require constant and repetitive calls to action. Youth-adult collaboration builds citizenship, challenges the status quo, brings forth new ideas and breeds collaboration between generations. The potential change is not just within the youth. It also offers opportunities to strengthen community. Linds, Goulet & Sammel (2010) suggest when youth and adults inhabit a dance of creativity, they share power to redefine adult behaviour. It is this push to redefine adult behaviour that is at the heart of this paper.

Looking across several project at once provides an opportunity to recognize multiple levels of a system inhabited by youth and adults. Blanchet-Cohen & Brunson (2014) exemplified this by analyzing their four year YouthScape project through the lens of the multiple ecological levels (individual, group, institutional and community), as defined by Brofenbrenner's nested ecological systems.

Youth engagement and youth led programs and policies have been shown to be effective in a multitude of settings and across different sectors and countries. To place these case examples in a wider context, a few additional cases will be highlighted. Ekpiken & Ukpabio (2015) found that when youth are empowered to make change in local environments they can be effective in sustainable development in Nigeria. In a different avenue, Zeldon et al (2015) similarly found that there was a correlation with levels of youth empowerment and connectedness and participation in an after school program in Malaysia. In California, Wilson et al. (2007) found that the importance of the YES project was to bring young people together to provide space for them to be involved in civic engagement.

Conclusion

These case examples illustrate that when youth and adults work together there are tangible benefits at multiple societal levels. There are some parameters needed to make these processes work, but their exploration lie outside the remit of this short paper. For youth, safe adult collaboration can provide positive supportive developmental experience and feelings of efficacy, belonging, and connectedness. For adults and communities there is much to gain. How we, as individuals, communities, societies, view children and young people directly impacts how our policies, programs and practices make allowances for them to provide relevant, meaningful and effective input.

Recommendations

Good participation, or active participation, is not about just listening to children, but acting on what they say and working towards collaboration (Manion & Nixon, 2012; Boyden & Ennew, 1997). Shier (2001) articulated five stages to the development of effective participation for children, including: being listened to; being supported in expressing views; having their views taken into account; being involved in decision-making; and sharing power and responsibility. This paper presents evidence from the field and from the literature of examples that illustrate Shier's fifth level of participation, youth-adult collaboration. This level of collaboration is what we need to see more of.

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