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Field Work Reflection

Youth Participatory Evaluation and Youth Advisory Models in a Youth Development Program: Successes and Challenges in Cultivating Youth Voice and Participation

Introduction

Youth voice and participation are increasingly popular topics in the youth development field. Celebrated as a means to increase equity and empowerment of young people, initiatives to increase and elevate youth voice occur in many youth programs through a variety of models and to varying levels of success. In exploring this field, I hoped to explore the complexities of youth participation within the nonprofit organizational context. I was curious as to whether the advisory council model would be a means to significantly increase youth voice organization-wide, if it would end up as a means by which adult staff tokenized youth to gain traction with funders and other adult stakeholders, or if it would fall somewhere between these two extremes. This paper chronicles my work on the development and facilitation of a youth advisory model and youth participatory evaluation (YPE) within an education and youth development nonprofit and discusses the successes and challenges of the program. While the youth advisory and YPE model was successful in building leadership and cultivating youth voice within the Youth Advisory Council (YAC) program, I found that there were limits to the level of voice and participation youth experienced beyond the confines of the YAC.

I conducted my field work through ACES (Athletes Committed to Educating Students), a Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization that runs programs focused on math and social-emotional skill building with the goal of reducing the academic achievement or opportunity gap between both students of color and their white peers as well as lower-income students and their wealthier peers. ACES has been operating in Minneapolis and Saint Paul for approximately twenty years, and has a strong track record of positive academic impacts for the 4th-8th grade students who participate in the program. ACES programs are held before and after school and use a unique sports-based math and social-emotional skill-building curriculum. I have been an ACES staff member for a year and a half. During the 2016-2017 school year, I piloted a YAC initiative as part of my work with ACES. The pilot program served as a foundation for a more formalized and intentionally-developed YAC program for the 2017-2018 year, which is the program around which my field work centered. The focus of the 2017-2018 YAC program was twofold: to intentionally combine social-emotional learning with youth organizing, and to work with young people on a YPE project. Beyond these concrete goals, the YAC was designed as a means by which ACES could increase youth voice within the organization.

ACES' organizational motivation for adding the YAC stemmed from the realization that space for youth voice did not exist within ACES' formal program structure. While some staff cultivated opportunities for youth voice and participation in their individual practices, this was exceptional rather than expected. Leadership skills are emphasized in ACES' social-emotional learning curriculum, but the focus falls on leadership among peers more than leadership opportunities where youth are viewed as partners with adults. My personal motivation for researching and developing a youth advisory program stemmed from my personal youth work

values. I view youth work as a means to recognize young people as valuable contributors and to create equitable opportunities for young people to participate in their communities in meaningful ways. The YAC is a means by which I can push for an increase in youth participation across ACES' programming and further develop my own practices to be youth-centered and equitable.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

In *Civic Youth Work*, Velure Roholt and Baizerman provide an overarching framework for civic youth work which shaped my approach to the initial development of the ACES YAC. While Roholt and Baizerman focus on civic work and activism more specifically than a youth advisory model within a nonprofit organization, the principles they discuss were easily adapted to the creation of the YAC. A key principle of civic youth work is the belief that “young people are systematically and largely (if not almost fully) marginalized, if not outright excluded, from everyday citizen work on issues meaningful and consequential to them, for others, and for a community” (Baizerman and VeLure Roholt, 16). I found this assertion to be true when viewing ACES as the community and ACES students as its often-marginalized citizens.

Cooper's *Participatory Evaluation in Youth and Community Work: Theory and Practice* is both a theoretical and practical resource on participatory evaluation. The first part of the book discusses evaluation through a critical theory lens. Cooper asserts that “evaluation is inherently political” (9) and thus we must examine the political, social, and economic factors that may affect evaluation work. Cooper also emphasizes the importance of both young people and direct youth work practitioners participating in evaluation as a means to prevent both groups of people

from being alienated from the process (37). The YAC YPE project was an example of this: the entire project was directed and implemented by young people in partnership with direct service staff, taking some guidance from leadership and evaluation consultants.

In her discussion of the politics of evaluation, Cooper sheds light on the ways neoliberalism has shaped the way we view evaluation and define success. Cooper connects neoliberalism to managerialism in organizations, which “to bring[s] about organisational change in order to meet the competitive challenge of a global economy” (28). In evaluation, managerialism and neoliberalism encourage quantitative methods to maintain accountability, but do not necessarily lead to higher program quality from the perspective of the populations served or practitioners. In youth work, we find tension between the qualitative processes and practices that dominate the field and the desire for quantitative accountability due to managerialism. The emphasis on quantitative impact measures stemming from our neoliberal system has “shifted the focus of evaluation from one of ‘improving’ programmes to one of ‘proving the worth’ of programmes” (29). Cooper calls for an expansion of the group of people who have the power to define the shared language of evaluation within youth work, leading to her advocacy for youth participatory evaluation. By including program participants in the evaluation process, we can evaluate programs in a way that centers the perspectives of the population served.

Finally, I drew on Evertz’s “Aligning Youth Organizing and Social-Emotional Learning” as a theoretical framework to inform my pedagogical approach in facilitating the YAC. Evertz argues that while social-emotional learning and youth organizing are “typically treated as separate approaches to youth development,” they “not only overlap, but complement each other in ways that benefit the healthy development of youth” (25). Throughout the program planning

process and in the facilitation of each YAC meeting, my co-facilitator and I focused on blending students' development of social-emotional skills with their organizing or civic work.

Practical Tools

There are a wide range of resources available to practitioners hoping to incorporate youth voice and youth participation into existing programming or to create their own youth advisory councils. The toolkits I drew from were “Participatory Evaluation with Young People” by Barry Checkoway and Katie Richards-Schuster; “Youth-Adult Partnerships in Evaluation (Y-AP/E)” by Shep Zeldin, Libby Bestul, and Jane Powers; and Youthprise’s “Youth Advisory Structures: Suggestions for Agency Practice.” My initial approach in using these toolkits was to determine ways in which I could adapt them to fit within the ACES context and, by doing so, achieve the incorporation of youth voice in the organization. However, as evidenced throughout this paper, youth voice cannot be “achieved” through specific programs or practices; it must be part of the broader organizational culture and structure. As I moved toward this realization, I shifted my usage of these toolkits to draw on them for facilitation ideas and YPE strategies rather than as a standalone solution.

YPE was the ACES YAC’s main project for the 2017-18 school year. While most of my knowledge of program evaluation in general came from professional and academic experience, I also used Cooper’s aforementioned *Participatory Evaluation in Youth and Community Work: Theory and Practice* as a foundation for my understanding of the participatory aspect of the evaluation project we undertook. The book provided concrete strategies and practices I used as a YPE facilitator.

Program Implementation

The YAC program ran from October 2017 to May 2018. The group met every two weeks for one hour at a time. All YAC members also participated in regular daily ACES out-of-school-time programming at three ACES sites in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. I developed the program's central goals based on my research on youth advisory models, YPE, and ACES' organizational motivations: first, to intentionally combine social-emotional learning with youth organizing work; to evaluate ACES programming through YPE; and, more generally, to increase youth voice and participation in ACES programming. As the lead facilitator, I oversaw the student application process and determined program structures. I worked with one adult co-facilitator, Janyesha Jackson, who assisted with facilitation of meetings, planning activities for meetings, and debriefing challenges and successes.

Over the course of the school year, the YAC completed three projects as a group. First, the group created a music video about the ACES program to thank donors who made contributions to ACES on Give To the Max Day, a state-wide day of philanthropy that encourages individuals to donate to Minnesota nonprofits. Second, the YAC planned an ACES-wide "spirit week," during which students across four ACES sites dressed according to themes chosen by the YAC members. The YAC members planned, publicized, and debriefed the spirit week.

The third and most significant project the YAC completed was the YPE project, which was an ongoing process throughout the school year. The students learned about YPE and why participatory evaluation can be beneficial to youth programs. With guidance from myself and Janyesha, the YAC members developed a survey designed to evaluate students' experiences in

ACES during the school year. They learned about survey design and developing strong questions, created a survey using Google Forms, implemented the survey at all four ACES sites, and gathered data from their peers. Once the data was collected, they conducted quantitative and qualitative analysis, primarily through coding survey responses. The YAC members collaboratively came to conclusions based on their data and used this information to provide a list of recommendations for changes ACES staff can implement in future programming.

To document the program and reflect on my own practice, I took field notes after meetings, preparation sessions, and interactions with students or staff that related to the YAC project. My notes included details about meetings, student behavior, my own challenges and successes, and the planning process as well as broader conclusions and realizations gained throughout the process. These notes provided a basis for the following documentation of successes, challenges, and conclusions.

Successes

One of the goals for the YAC program was to intentionally blend social-emotional learning with civic youth work. This goal was informed by Evertz's research on the potential benefits of combining these often separate fields for increased impact. Janyesha and I opted to include both social-emotional learning and youth organizing (in this case, YPE work) into the agenda for each YAC meeting. To further blend the two, we also viewed all aspects of the program as experiential social-emotional learning and framed student reflections through that lens. Throughout and after each meeting, we could ask reflection questions that encouraged the YAC members to think about the various social-emotional skills they were using as well as their

development as leaders over the course of the year. We also provided various resources for the students to use to reflect on their personalities, strengths and identities, including personality tests such as High Five and 16 Personalities. This approach allowed students to draw connections to the ways in which social-emotional skills are tied to community engagement, leadership among peers, organizing, and activism.

The YAC members also successfully completed their YPE project, gaining insightful feedback from their peers. The students brainstormed issues to address within ACES programming, decided on a way to gather their peers' feedback, collected data, analyzed it, and submitted recommendations to ACES leadership advocating for program improvements based on their data. Two YAC representatives shared the recommendations with all ACES staff at a year-end data review and evaluation retreat, and it was well-received by staff at all levels of the organization.

Beyond the YAC program itself, I noticed changes organizationally and in my own practice stemming from the increased emphasis on youth participation and youth voice. As Baizerman and VeLure Roholt explain, the role of a civic youth worker is “to bring about and sustain the ongoing conditions, context, and/or environment in a small group so that the young members can be exposed to and begin mastery of citizen roles” (9). I lived this ethos both through the facilitation of the YAC group, but also more broadly. Due to my ongoing research on youth participation for the YAC project, I gained knowledge and practical methods for increasing youth voice both as part of the YAC program and as part of the regular ACES programming I managed. I found myself working with my staff team during regular programming to identify opportunities for youth voice and leadership far more than I did before I

had an intentional focus on youth voice through academic research. Janyesha also pushed for increases in youth voice in the ACES program she coordinated. Due to the two of us frequently discussing youth voice, other program coordinators within ACES also began to think more intentionally about ways in which they could increase and elevate youth voice in their respective programs.

Finally, at the end of the 2017-2018 program year, ACES staff conducted an internal process to define a set of organizational values. Among the values selected was “youth-centered,” meaning that ACES strives to make decisions with youth at the center. As this is a newly-defined value, it is an aspirational value rather than a fully-realized one. Regardless, explicitly stating the importance of the organization centering young people in an organizational values statement illustrates a desire to focus on elevating youth participation and valuing the voices of young people. I am optimistic that in the future, this value will be used to inform programming decisions and continue to steer ACES toward an increase in youth voice.

Challenges

Despite clear successes within the YAC program, there were also challenges, especially in fully realizing the goal to increase youth voice and participation in ACES programming. While the program was viewed favorably and the YAC members’ recommendations were welcomed by ACES staff, organizational barriers still exist which reduce the potential for increased youth voice outside the confines of the YAC program. There are multiple factors contributing to these barriers.

Throughout the program year, there was a lack of organizational support and prioritization for the YAC. The program did not have dedicated staff; rather it was an extra project taken on by Janyesha and myself in addition to our regular job responsibilities. This caused staff burnout at times as well as a lack of time and energy to be dedicated to the program. Without enough work time dedicated to the program, we were not able to prepare and debrief as thoroughly and collaboratively as we would have liked. Our work together focused most closely on running successful meetings and preparing materials, reducing the amount of time we had to dedicate toward determining ways in which we could more seamlessly blend the YAC program into ACES programming more broadly.

The program was also not an organizational priority in terms of budget. We had a small program operations budget, nearly all of which went toward purchasing food for the young people at each meeting. We did not have funds to rent space and were not able to secure a free meeting space during our meeting time, so we had to use a space within the ACES office. The office space made transportation a challenge for five out of the ten YAC members. Janyesha and I addressed this challenge by providing transportation for students ourselves; unfortunately the added time spent driving students to and from meetings further contributed to staff burnout.

Finally, and most significantly, it was evident that ACES staff typically viewed youth voice as a value that was isolated to and achieved by the YAC program, rather than something that could permeate and strengthen all programming. Throughout the year, ACES staff expressed support and excitement about the YAC's projects, but rarely offered additional support or engaged in dialogue about how we might incorporate similar principles beyond the YAC program. A desire to be "youth centered" frequently tended toward what Hart refers to as youth

tokenization rather than authentic participation, which is defined as “child initiated, shared decisions with adults” (8).

Over the course of the school year, ACES leadership turned to YAC members in instances when a young person’s voice, image, presence, or opinion would benefit the organization in some way. YAC members were invited to fundraising events to volunteer and photos and videos of them were used for promotional and fundraising purposes. However, when decisions were made regarding programming, staffing, and organizational values, youth were not invited to participate. On multiple occasions, direct program staff advocated for increased power and agency for young people or pointed out areas in which the organization could increase opportunities for youth participation, but these ideas were frequently met with resistance from administrative staff.

As the ACES team defined our organizational values, we engaged in dialogues to determine and define value. When discussing “youth-centered,” it was apparent that staff lacked a shared definition of this value. While direct program staff viewed youth-centeredness as practices that view youth as equal partners, include youth in the decision-making process, and elevate youth voices, ACES leadership and administrative staff pushed back. Staff who had less direct contact with youth were hesitant to refer to youth as “equal” partners and maintained that youth should not be viewed as equal partners. Leadership staff also resisted the idea to incorporate youth more authentically at every level of the organization, from the board level to daily programming. In some instances, staff members resisted including “youth-centered” as a value because they viewed it as something that only applied to direct service work. This is a clear example of the contrast between two approaches to youth work discussed by Baizerman and

VeLure Roholt. The biophysiological developmental approach to youth development views young people as future adults or adults-in-training (Baizerman and VeLure Roholt 22). The social-constructivist approach views youth as citizens currently (24). While our direct service staff took the social-constructivist approach, administrative and leadership staff tended toward the biophysiological developmental approach. In order for ACES to truly value youth voice, we will need to continue dialogues about how we view youth as participants and how these views can help or hinder their opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making.

Conclusions

Through the experience of developing, facilitating, and reflecting upon the YAC program, I came to a series of conclusions which will inform the future of YAC programming and my own practices as a youth worker both within ACES and beyond.

It was clear that the youth advisory model was a successful way to engage youth in developing their leadership skills and other social-emotional skills. The practice of blending social-emotional learning with concrete, project-based youth organizing work like YPE was beneficial to both initiatives. Both the program model and the YPE project were ways to elevate youth voice within the organization, and, to a certain extent, we achieved this. However, these successes are due to specific program practices that sought out youth voice within one specific program.

I argue that in order to meaningfully and authentically seek out and include youth voice and participation in youth programming, it cannot be limited to one program or practice. It must be an organizational value and part of the organizational mindset, from the board of directors and

organizational leadership to direct service practitioners and youth program participants alike. ACES is moving toward increasing youth participation organization-wide, but as evidenced through my field work, the organization still has progress to make. As youth voice and participation continue to be emphasized and valued by direct service staff and youth program participants, it is my hope that this mindset will move up the organizational structure. Ideally, youth voice would be so ingrained in the organizational structure that a program like the YAC would not be necessary. The YAC program demonstrated clear accomplishments: youth leadership development, student feedback on the ACES experience, and an increased focus on youth voice among direct service staff. ACES also made progress organizationally in its inclusion of “youth-centered” as an organizational value. I am optimistic that the initial steps toward equitable and meaningful youth participation sparked by the YAC program will lead to increasingly significant changes in ACES’ programming, strategy, and organizational ethos.

Works Cited

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Additional Resources

Beyond the works cited in this paper, I used additional sources that informed my practice and pedagogy over the course of my field work project.

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