Youth Engagement

IMPACTS OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

When collaborative decision-making happens in a meaningful way, there are far reaching impacts. Beyond the individual benefits of being engaged, programs and policies in schools and community organizations are strengthened and improved when young people have opportunities to help shape, implement and evaluate them. (Zeldin, 2008; Gyamfi, 2007).

Engaged young people are physically and mentally healthier. They tend to have stronger self-esteem, increased critical thinking skills, a sense of teamwork and group belonging, and feel more commitment to the particular program, activity or process they are involved in. (Zeldin 2008)

Young people also report that being engaged improves their overall mental health by helping them build positive relationships with adults, by developing feelings of self-worth and identity, and by feeling valued as responsible members of the community capable of making valuable contributions despite their mental health status. (Gyamfi, 2007)

Families report positive change when their children are engaged. Families have also reported positive change when their children have been engaged in their own mental health care. Youth engagement helps families view their children as resilient and as capable individuals who are making positive changes in their own lives (Gyamfi, 2007).

CHALLENGES EXIST

In order for programs and treatment options within the mental health sector to be relevant and effective, increased collaboration between young people as 'consumers' and system 'stakeholders' (including clinicians within agencies and organizations) is needed (Newton, 2010).

While most adult practitioners are aware of the benefits and appeal of youth engagement and/or youth-adult partnerships, they are generally unsure how to transform the principles and processes into quality practice and it remains an abstract idea for many adults who work within conventional or traditional organizations. (Zeldin 2008)

As adults, we need to reflect on our own assumptions and practices in response to the complex health concerns of young people; this will allow us to connect more effectively with the real lives of young people and to be responsive in the programs and policies that we develop. (Percy-Smith, 2007)

Inflexible bureaucratic structures and oorganizations with traditional hierarchies which are not conducive to facilitating participation (Percy-Smith, 2007; Gunn) It's difficult for organizations to take risks and share ideas and power (Schulman). Adults hold their own perceptions and biases about youth which may be hard to overcome or un-learn (Schulman)

Youth Engagement requires organizational change

Creating the right environment and level of readiness to effectively engage youth and adults within an organization requires "transforming the way in which work is done" (Schulman)

Creating a "human infrastructure" as well as solid institutional frameworks and policies is key. Relationship-building is a crucial element of youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships, and in the adoption of these "principle and process-based" innovations.

Adults and the systems they work within need to begin to see youth as active rather than passive in their own health development (Percy-Smith, 2007).

To effectively begin to do this, children's mental health systems would need:

- To endorse the importance of youth input in their governance and service planning
- To include youth involvement and youth groups in their strategic plans and budgets
- To have youth representation and/or feedback in their advisory committees and
- planning
- To strive for proactive interventions and activities that would be planned for and
- provided based on youth input
- To endorse additional collaboration and cooperation with other agencies to expand
- youth learning and involvement opportunities (Gyamfi, 2007).

Getting there means...

There are no blueprints for developing participatory practice, nor should there be. Working with and supporting young people to develop approaches best suited to their unique situations and concerns. Making a commitment to working on the basis of shared principles, rooted in respect for young people's capacities as agents of change, and a willingness to recognize them as partners." (Chapter 10) Modelling Youth Engagement within your organization demonstrates to colleagues and staff that youth engagement works. Not expecting a one-size-fits-all process. Youth engagement requires "continual organizational and personal change". (Schulman)

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