Cultivating youth voice through participation in a Foster youth advisory board: Perspectives of facilitators

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the construct of youth voices in one state youth advisory board (YAB) from the perspective of program staff and child welfare liaisons and administrators (referred to as 'facilitators'). Our aim was to understand how youth voice is defined and activated on a foster youth advisory board. In-depth interviews with 13 facilitators of a YAB in a Mid-western state were conducted between August 2013 and June 2014. These interviews were a part of a larger study that investigated what 33 current and former elected officers of a YAB learned from participation. Each interview lasted between 1 and 1/2 to 2 h. A grounded dimensional analysis was used to investigate facilitators' perceptions of the impact of participation on the development of advocacy for self and others. Findings indicated that the belief system of facilitators, provision of social support, opportunities to try new roles, and state agency leadership contributed to the cultivation of youth voice through two parallel processes: personalization and professionalization. Suggestions for practice and YAB development are made to enhance sustainability and decrease tokenization of foster youths' voices in child welfare systems.

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1. Introduction

Foster youth advisory boards have the objective of providing current and former foster youth with opportunities to speak about issues that affect their lives and to advocate for child welfare system improvements. The youth advisory board Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio (O.H.I.O.)[1] states that their purpose is to "*be the knowledgeable statewide voice that influences policies and practices that affect all youth who have or will experience out-of-home care.*" The mission statement of North Carolina's foster youth advisory board, Say So,[2] includes the goal of "*speaking out about needed changes,*" and the goal of the Kansas Youth Advisory Board Council[3] is "*to enable [youth] to speak for themselves concerning issues that affect them directly.*" Growing evidence suggests that the voices of members of several state youth advisory boards have been instrumental in turning state policymakers into champions of child welfare legislative reforms (Fletcher, 2013; Mosley & Courtney, 2012). How youth voice is defined and activated on youth advisory boards remains to a large extent unknown. The research study presented here explores the processes that underlie the development of youth voice in one state foster youth advisory board from the perspectives of YAB staff and child welfare liaisons, as well as the features

of a state child welfare system that support and or constrain this process.

Youth voice is typically defined in the literature as the ideas, opinions, involvement, and initiative of young people in organizations, schools, government, and institutions (Garvey, McIntyre-Craig, & Myers, 2000). It originates from the idea that young people are too often excluded from the decision-making processes that concern them the most (Martin, Pittman, Ferber, & McMahon, 2007). Past research has found self-report measures of youth voice are associated with positive relationships with adults, increases in self-confidence, and a sense of belonging (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; Mitra, 2004; Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011). The frequent interchange of 'youth voice' with terms such as 'youth participation,' 'youth action,' 'youth engagement,' 'youth advising,' 'youth decision-making,' and 'youth governance' has nevertheless made it a challenging construct to define.[4] Some work characterizes 'youth voice' as representing a role of young people (Mitra, 2008) whereas other work conceptualizes 'youth voice' as a strategy for building capacity in organizations (Zellerbach Family Foundation, 2011) or a component of successful learning (Fredericks, Kaplan, & Zeisler, 2001). A lack of clarity in the conceptualization of 'youth voice' may be particularly problematic in large, child-serving systems, such as child welfare, where services are mandated, professionals have substantial power over youth, and decision-making comes from the top down (Costello, Toles, Spielberger, & Wynn, 2001). Repeated calls to reorient child welfare systems to emphasize more collaboration

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[4] A tip sheet produced by Youth Service America, for example, identifies 26 words commonly used within the youth voice and youth development fields.

and connection between professionals and young people (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003; Nybell, 2013; Samuels, 2009) makes it is critical to give renewed attention to defining and measuring this construct.

In this study, we explore 'youth voice' as a participatory practice that is in need of conceptual and methodological consideration to better understand its role and potential within child welfare systems. In doing so, we aim to consider the role of foster youth-led advisory boards in situating youth voice in institutional and relational contexts of power. Currently, foster youth advisory boards represent the main method used by states to strengthen youth voice in child welfare systems (Collins, 2004). Youth advisory boards, nevertheless, vary in how they do this (Forenza & Happonen, 2016; Havlicek, Lin, & Villalpando, 2016). Some—like California Youth Connection, the longest operating foster youth-led advocacy organization in the U.S.—strengthens youth voice independently from the state child welfare system and through an extensive network of state, regional, and chapter boards, whereas other youth advisory boards, such as the Missouri Statewide Youth Advisory Board – another long-standing board — operate through a partnership with the state child welfare agency and mostly through a state and regional networks (Havlicek et al., 2016). All aim to amplify the voices of foster youth by providing opportunities to share stories and turn personal difficulties into a collective struggle. Limited knowledge exists about specific features of youth advisory boards and child welfare contexts supporting youth voice; the risks and rewards that come from sharing difficult experiences with others; or the ways that youth advisory boards substantively change child welfare systems to take youth voice seriously, if at all.

2. Background literature

During fiscal year 2014, there were 415,129 children and youth placed in out-of-home care in the United States (U.S. DHHS, 2015). Over one-third was between the ages of 12 and 20 years (34%; $n = 141,181$). When foster youth without permanence reach the age of majority in out-of-home care they typically exit through emancipation or aging out. Numerous studies find they face poor prospects in the transition to adulthood, including high rates of homelessness (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Dworsky & Courtney, 2009; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009), criminal justice system involvement (Cusick, Havlicek, & Courtney, 2012), and low rates of post-secondary completion and employment (Courtney et al., 2011a; Courtney, Zinn, Koralek, & Bess, 2011b). To improve outcomes during the transition to adulthood, the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* (P.L. 110-351; hereafter referred to as the Fostering Connections Act) was passed to offer partial federal reimbursement of costs to states that extend foster care from age 18 to age 21 (Courtney and Society for Research in Child Development, 2009). As momentum grows for casting a safety net into adulthood, important insights lie in understanding how to increase positive pathways to adulthood (Courtney, Zinn, Zielewski, Bess, & Malm, 2008; Courtney et al., 2011a, 2011b; Montgomery, Donkoh, & Underhill, 2006; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

One way that federal policy seeks to improve outcomes in adulthood is through the inclusion of foster youths' voices in decision-making. In addition to extending foster care, Title II of the *Fostering Connections Act* amended the Social Security Act to require state and private agency caseworkers to provide children with age-appropriate assistance and support in developing a transition plan within 90 days of emancipation. The inclusion of foster youths' voices in case and transition planning was further amended in 2014 under the *Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act* (P.L. 113-183; hereafter referred to as the Preventing Sex Trafficking Act). This legislation requires states to "*empower*" foster youth in the development of their own case and transition plan. The use of the word "*empower*" represents a shift in child welfare policy and practice with respect to professional-client models of

practice. On the one hand, it seems to acknowledge a sense of powerlessness that may be embedded in and reinforced by policy and practice models that exclude foster youth from decision-making in their lives. It may also imply a preference for increasing developmental learning experiences relationships between youth and other professionals. More systematic attention to the policy and practice contexts of child welfare systems that are empowering and disempowering would further the field's understanding of practice approaches that empower foster youth and create new contexts for listening.

Conditions in out-of-home care underscore the necessity of building the capacity of child welfare systems to listen to foster youth. A consistent body of research finds that some foster youth perceive child welfare contexts as depersonalizing (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Kools, 1997; Rauktis, Fusco, Cahalane, Bennett, & Reinhart, 2011); child welfare professionals as having limited interest in listening or responding to concerns in out-of-home care (Bessell, 2011; Nybell, 2013); and decisions as being largely out of foster youths' control (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Nybell, 2013; Samuels, 2009). These concerns are heightened by research that finds as many as one-third of former foster youth (33%) are abused or neglected by a substitute caregiver during out-of-home care (Pecora, Studies, & Programs, 2005), and one out of every ten (11%) have a substantiated allegation of maltreatment by a substitute caregiver (Havlicek, 2014). A growing body of scholars have called for a "*radical shift*" in child welfare policy and practice that emphasizes active collaboration, shared decision-making and power (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Kools, 1997; Nybell, 2013; Propp et al., 2003); yet participatory practices with young people are not without problems (Matthews, 2001; Taft & Gordon, 2013). In part, not all approaches are equally engaging (Matthews & Limb, 2003; Richards-Schuster, 2012; Taft & Gordon, 2013). The voices of some youth may be legitimatized over others. In addition, efforts to "give voice" to another can reinforce power imbalances and legitimize the perspectives of those in authority. Professionals' subjective experiences interacting with youth in collaborative partnerships may therefore be critical to understand (Nybell, 2013). Delineating the positive and negative aspects of facilitating youth voice in the context of child welfare system involvement is essential to improved conceptualization and measurement.

The main way that states have sought to increase youth voice in child welfare systems is through foster youth advisory boards (Collins, 2004). Youth advisory boards or councils were originally designed as a critical departure from expert-driven, top down, and professional-focused practice models (Rappaport, 1981; Crowe, 2007). Over time, some states' youth advisory boards have evolved to engage in legislative actions that create reforms in child welfare systems' policies and practices, making them critical empowerment programs (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006). Research finds that key dimensions of critical youth empowerment programs include a welcoming and safe environment, meaningful participation and engagement, power sharing between youth and adults, engagement in critical reflection, participation in action to effect change, and individual and collective empowerment (Jennings et al., 2006). Maton and Salem (1995) suggest that individuals gain greater control over their lives and accomplish important life goals through organizational settings that are characterized by 1) an inspirational system of beliefs; 2) a support system that is comprehensive and caring; 3) opportunities to try new roles; and 4) leadership that is visionary and committed to change. Christens (2012) argues that the above organizational characteristics of empowerment settings create changes in the social network structure of participants, which has important implications for the relationships that are developed in these settings.

The role of relationships in supporting youth voice may be particularly interesting when applied to foster youth. Relationship-building may take more time with foster youth given histories of child maltreatment, loss of relationships, and impermanence (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Risks may surface when past histories of trauma are engaged in a caring relationship. The few guidelines that