



The new mentality: Youth–adult partnerships in community mental health promotion

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ABSTRACT

Youth–adult partnerships (Y-APs) engage young people in meaningful community activity and in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives. The current study is an examination of the process of The New Mentality, a multi-site pilot program intended to mobilize Y-APs to raise community awareness of child and youth mental health, reduce the stigma surrounding mental illness, and advocate for a mental health service system that is more responsive to the needs of children and youth. Data were gathered through individual interviews, focus groups, observations, and questionnaires with youth and adult stakeholders at various levels of the project. A number of themes emerged from the data. These included the critical nature of relationships youth experienced, the cultural differences and advocacy opportunities presented in the child and youth mental health system, the program's level of structure, and individual learning and knowledge sharing.

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1. Introduction

Youth–adult partnerships (Y-APs), sometimes referred to as youth participation or engagement, involve youth and adults working together in the institutions and decision-making processes that affect them (Checkoway, 2011; Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). Y-APs have the potential to benefit the youth themselves, adult participants, and the settings in which participation occurs (Ramey, 2013; Sullivan & Larson, 2010). In this article we present an analysis of *The New Mentality*, a community mental health promotion program that engaged youth, ages 13 to 25 years, as partners in the mental health system. The New Mentality began as an 18-month pilot project with goals of promoting mental health awareness, reducing stigma associated with mental health, and advocating for a system that best meets the mental health needs of children and youth. As a Y-AP project focused on youth mental health, The New Mentality offered a unique opportunity to examine the initial developmental process of engaging youth in participatory mental health promotion. In the current paper, we report on the findings from our study of this process.

2. The New Mentality program

A number of different theoretical models of youth engagement in programs and organizations have been identified (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010). Correspondingly, practitioners and researchers have had differential views for the optimal level of youth involvement, ranging from being totally youth-led to an equal cooperation between adults and youth. The New Mentality pilot program was intended to be an intergenerational partnership, also referred to as a pluralistic Y-AP, which involves shared youth–adult control (Wong et al., 2010). It was initiated after youth members of a consumer advocacy group proposed a program in which youth would have a voice on mental health issues.

Despite the attempts of the New Mentality's program staff, the program did not fit within the definition of an intergenerational partnership. Intergenerational partnerships, in contrast to adult-led or youth-led initiatives, involve adults treating youth as equal partners or youth becoming equal in the process. Responsibility for leadership might shift between adults and youth at different points in the process, so that the influences of youth and adults are not always equal. However, adults and youth both hold strong roles and collaboration occurs at each stage (Checkoway, 2011; Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2012). It must be noted that the focus of the program, and therefore the current study, was youth implementation of an adult-led health initiative, not youth empowerment. That said, youth participation in mental health promotion and the broader health field, and therefore The New Mentality program and evaluation, represents a step forward toward such empowerment.

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The New Mentality pilot involved two main program activities. The first was the establishment of a network of youth and adults across the province of Ontario, Canada, who were interested in mental health issues. Youth leaders were initially recruited at eight community sites. These youth took leadership for the group process and projects at their site and were the primary youth contacts for The New Mentality program. Youth leaders partnered with adults (referred to as adult allies) located within local community groups or children's mental health organizations, and recruited other youth participants. Adult allies were most frequently staff (e.g., youth workers) of these agencies. Youth leaders and adult allies also recruited additional youth participants at each site, who were to support and participate in The New Mentality's program activities. Y-APs were formed in order to give youth opportunities to play a meaningful role in mental health advocacy and awareness.

In addition to forming the youth–adult network, these local groups focused on the second general program activity, which comprised developing specific activities, projects, and events to reduce the stigma of mental health, promote mental health awareness, and improve the child and youth mental health system. These projects and events were chosen by youth leaders, participants, and adult allies at each site, with support and suggestions from The New Mentality program staff. For example, some sites hosted events focused on sharing stories and rethinking views of mental health (e.g., coffeehouses, variety shows). Other sites developed tools for information sharing (e.g., mental health magazines, lists of local resources). One site hosted arts-based workshops for youth on the topic of mental health, and another engaged staff at a local youth organization in an attempt to open up youth–adult dialog and promote more positive outlooks on youth mental health. In addition to the youth–adult network and site-specific projects, youth leaders and participants were invited to become involved in some components of the evaluation planning, analysis, and dissemination of results of The New Mentality program.

3. The perceived outcomes of Y-APs

Little research exists on the specific outcomes of Y-APs in community mental health promotion and prevention programs. This lack of data might be because, although professionals working in this field are ideally situated to engage youth, few foster youth's potential as active participants in community change (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). Nevertheless, at least one study of perceived outcomes does exist. Howe, Batchelor, and Bochynska (2011) reported on the implementation and evaluation of a youth participation model in youth mental health services in Australia. Youth ages 15 to 25 years were recruited as consultants on the development and design of a wide range of mental health services. The youth, just over a third of whom were themselves current or former consumers of mental health services, were also involved in a community awareness campaign on youth mental health. A number of perceived positive impacts on youth were identified, including gaining skills such as teamwork, communication, and presentation skills, and increased knowledge of mental health problems. Youth also reported feeling valued and empowered, as well as developing new friendships over the course of the project. Moreover, youth participation was perceived to impact service through the tangible contributions of the youth consultants, for example, as the public face of the community awareness campaign.

Findings on the potential benefits of Y-APs in youth programs outside of the mental health domain are also largely positive. For example, youth participation in general community health promotion has been linked to enhanced youth development and greater social integration in the community (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward, & Green, 2003). Further, youth participation in activism organizations has been found to be related to higher levels of leadership, decision-making, and community involvement (Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, & Lacoe, 2006). A recent review of experimental research on programs that regularly

involved young people in decision-making and program leadership, however, found insufficient research to conclude that these programs had any benefits for youth (Morton & Montgomery, 2013). With regard to potential benefits for adults and organizations involved in Y-APs, extant qualitative research suggests that Y-APs in youth-serving organizations are related to perceptions of improved service provision and greater skills in youth work and increased motivation for adult allies (Ramey, 2013).

4. The process of Y-APs

As with research on the outcomes of Y-APs in community mental health promotion and prevention programs, little research exists on the dynamic processes occurring within these programs. In addition to identifying perceived positive impacts of Y-APs, however, Howe et al. (2011) also identified a number of challenges to the process. These included dropout due to personal reasons in youth's lives (e.g., changes in employment), the need for greater support for youth with disadvantaged backgrounds, a lack of funding availability, and the challenge of balancing youth's autonomy and ability to take on more responsibilities with the need to provide support and skill development to youth.

Again, research on youth participation in other areas, such as recreation and community health, is also informative to the process of Y-APs in the mental health system. This research suggests that, for youth, Y-APs might include a process of empowerment, learning, and becoming engaged through action and responsibility. For example, in a study of youth participation in community health promotion, Cargo et al. (2003) found that youth became empowered as they took increasing responsibility for voicing their ideas, making decisions, and taking action, and that this emerged through a transactional, increasingly egalitarian partnership between youth and adults. In a study of youth participation in a large network of new youth centers focused on recreational and learning activities, Morciano, Scardigno, Manuti, and Pastore (2014) similarly noted that deliberative youth participation, particularly during the initial planning of the centers, supported changes in the process of empowerment and improved management skills for youth and young adult managers. Additionally, through managing and responding to the demands of the work they were doing in Y-APs in arts and leadership programs, and learning from the outcomes of this work, youth gained skills related to a sense of agency, including concrete organizational skills, how to mobilize and regulate effort, and strategic thinking abilities (Larson & Angus, 2011). Moreover, youth participants identified transferring this learning into other areas of their lives.

As youth in Y-APs become engaged, they have been found not only to experience empowerment, learning, and greater engagement, but also to develop personal connections to program activities. Findings regarding these personal connections have centered on youth's learning for their own future, developing a sense of competence, and pursuing purpose in their activities. Youth's personal connections to their own future (e.g., planning for potential career paths) have been noted in studies of Y-APs in arts and recreation (Dawes & Larson, 2011) and health promotion activities (Cargo et al., 2003). Youth also have identified becoming more personally connected through the competence they developed in program activities (Dawes & Larson, 2011). Finally, connections to the pursuit of a larger purpose in their activities might be of particular interest to youth in mental health promotion and prevention because of the potential for social change and impacting others (Cargo et al., 2003; Dawes & Larson, 2011).

Some research on the process of Y-APs has focused less on youth's experience of participation and more on their capacity to create change through tangible project contributions. In a community-based participatory research project on health promotion involving homeless youth, for example, Garcia, Minkler, Cardenas, Grills, and Porter (2014) described the success of youth researchers in changing policy (e.g., related to recreation). Further, youth engagement in programs intended to reduce HIV transmission among youth found that greater,

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