



Youth participation in foster youth advisory boards: Perspectives of facilitators

Judy Havlicek^{a,*}, Ashley Curry^b, Fabiola Villalpando^c

^a University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, United States

^b Erikson Institute, Chicago, IL, United States

^c Loyola University, Chicago, IL, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Foster youth advisory boards
Youth participation
Foster youth
Child welfare

ABSTRACT

Foster youth advisory boards (YAB) have the objective of promoting foster youth participation in decisions that are made about their lives. There is currently little known about how youth participation is conceptualized or implemented within or across boards. This qualitative study explored youth participation from the perspectives of 42 primary YAB facilitators in 34 states. The study's findings are derived from telephone interviews. A thematic analysis identified four primary approaches to youth participation, which we labeled as being, 'Adult-Led' (n = 2); 'Adult-Driven Youth Input' (n = 14); '50–50 Youth-Adult Partnership' (n = 16); and 'Youth-Led' (n = 2). Within each of these approaches to youth participation, we present findings that explore facilitators' conceptualizations of youth participation, the strategies and program activities they use to enact youth participation, and the strengths and limitations of each of the approaches. Our discussion explores implications for YAB program activities, youth participation in child welfare systems, and future research.

1. Introduction

Foster youth advisory boards in the United States have the objective of promoting foster youth participation in decisions that are made about their lives. The mission statement of the Missouri State Youth Advisory Board includes the goal of “empowering youth to provide input into the policies and procedures in out-of-home care.” Similarly, the mission statement of New Mexico's Leaders Uniting Voices Youth Advocates (LUVYA) is to, “collaborate with others to develop innovative alternatives to existing and potential problems facing foster youth.” In a recent study of 47 foster youth advisory boards in the United States, 83% of facilitators reported using a youth-adult partnership approach to youth participation where state and private child welfare agency facilitators strive to partner with youth and create opportunities to share decision-making (Havlicek, Lin, & Villalpando, 2016). Because youth participation requires the involvement of foster youth in ways that may challenge existing child welfare policy frameworks (Propp, Ortega, & NewHeart, 2003) and professionally-driven practice approaches (Krebs, Pitcoff, & Shalof, 2013; McGowan, 2005), an important task of research is to expand our understanding of the ways that child welfare professionals make meaning of foster youth participation, and the strategies that are used to anticipate and/or overcome challenges.

Youth participation is defined as a process of involving young people in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives (Checkoway, 2011; Checkoway & Guitierrez, 2006). In the field of social work, it is most commonly used in conjunction with engagement (Pritzker & Richards-Schuster, 2016) whereas in other fields, such as community psychology, youth participation is interchanged with empowerment and social inclusion (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). Outside of the United States, and in countries that have ratified the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child, youth participation is defined as a human right (Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015). This suggests that youth participation represents a broad construct that encompasses multiple forms ranging from the involvement of young people in organized program activities, such as sports (Perkins et al., 2007; Tiffany, Exner-Cortens, & Eckenrode, 2012) to the inclusion of young people's voices in communities and systems in which they are not traditionally heard (Flanagan & Christens, 2011; Ginwright, 2011). Such engagement is theorized to prevent broader societal disenfranchisement of marginalized adolescents and young adults (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2002; Perkins et al., 2007; Tiffany et al., 2012).

Collins (2004), in a review of the implementation of independent living policy and child welfare services for adolescents in the United States (U.S.) suggests that foster youth advisory boards represent the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: jhavlice@illinois.edu (J. Havlicek).

main method used by states to include youth as partners in decision-making about child welfare policy and practice. Originating in the U.S. in the late 1980s and early 1990s to bring more of a positive youth development approach to serving foster youth in independent living programs (Collins, 2004; Fernandez-Alcantara, 2017), foster youth advisory boards have since proliferated to nearly every state (Forenza & Happonen, 2016; Havlicek et al., 2016). Crowe (2007), in a review of these efforts, highlights the challenges that the earliest foster youth advisory boards experienced when they were new, understaffed, and received limited training and financial support to facilitate youth participation. Since that time, and largely through trial and error, Crowe (2007) suggests that facilitators have acquired the practical experience that is necessary to better support youth participation in foster youth advisory boards. There are nevertheless growing concerns about youth boards and councils as flawed and/or ineffective participatory devices, which neither confer power to young people to make decisions in their lives nor guarantee that young people's views are taken seriously by professional-dominated systems and community agencies (Kwon, 2013; Matthews, 2001; Taft & Gordon, 2011). This may be especially true when professionals are reluctant to partner with youth (Collins, Augsberger, & Gecker, 2016; Gordon & Taft, 2011) and systems do not have mechanisms in place to assure that young people are integrated and contributing within the organization (Gurstein, Lovato, & Ross, 2003). Delineating the necessary conditions underlying youth participation in large systems of care and the dilemmas associated with implementation may therefore come with important insights to the field.

In this study, we explore youth participation from the perspectives of primary facilitators of foster youth advisory boards in the U.S. Our aim is twofold. First, we seek to explore how youth participation is conceptualized and enacted with foster youth, a group that several studies find to be at risk of powerlessness and social exclusion through processes of non-participation in child welfare systems (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Kools, 1997; Kools, 1999). Second, we seek to understand the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to youth participation from the perspective of facilitators given the under-developed base of knowledge in this area and the growing role of youth participation in federal independent living policy. Despite the increasing requirements placed on states for foster youth participation, many services and activities in child welfare systems (e.g., youth driven case planning, youth directed transition plans, youth inclusion in independent living programming) have not developed into a coherent system of services. Instead, there is limited understanding of the necessary conditions to create and support participatory practices in child welfare systems (Nybell, 2013). To ground our understanding and create a frame for the study of youth participation in foster youth advisory boards, we draw on the growing literature on adolescents in child welfare systems and the increasing attention being given to youth participation in federal independent living policy; models of youth participation with youth in the general population; and the perspectives of frontline service providers in child welfare systems.

2. Background

2.1. Foster youth participation in child welfare systems

As of September 30, 2015, there were 139,871 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 20 in foster care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). This represents more than one third of all foster youth (34%). Several qualitative studies seeking to understand foster youths' perspectives of their experiences in foster care conclude that they frequently perceive themselves as being powerlessness (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Kools, 1997; Kools, 1999) and as having limited control given the few opportunities that exist while in foster care to participate in important decisions (Fruendlich, Avery, & Padgett, 2007; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). This is true despite the fact that when foster youth are asked they report that greater

involvement in child welfare decision-making and case proceedings would help them to better make sense of the complex circumstances surrounding their childhoods (Geenan & Powers, 2007; Rolock & Perez, 2016).

A recent panel study of 727 foster youth between the ages of 16 and 17 in California highlights the specific areas where rates of participation may be particularly low (Courtney, Charles, Okpych, Napolitano, & Halsted, 2014). Of the 90% of foster youth that reported being asked to attend a court hearing, only 40% reported being included in courtroom discussions 'a lot.' Adding to concerns is that just under one-third of the sample (31.3%) reported not being involved in or not being aware of their case plan for independent living (5.2% vs. 26.1% respectively) (Courtney et al., 2014). By age 19, half (50.3%) of those young people that reported not being involved in or aware of their case plan for independent living exited foster care early when given the option to remain in care through age 21 compared with 13% of those young people that reported taking a lead in and/or being involved in the development of their case plan for independent living (Courtney et al., 2016). These preliminary findings suggest that youth participation in case decision-making and proceedings may facilitate better outreach and engagement of foster youth in safety nets that are intended to mitigate abrupt pathways into adulthood.

Federal child welfare policy first provided funds for youth participation activities through the passage of the Independent Living Initiative of 1985 (P.L. 99–272). Under Title IV of the Social Security Act, the Independent Living Initiative provided federal funds to states for the first time to develop and implement a set of services that prepare foster youth for adulthood. The Independent Living Initiative gave states flexibility in terms of the services that could be provided to foster youth who were at least 16 years old. Examples of the types of services included are those that provide education and employment assistance, and transition planning (Courtney, 2009). Examples of the specific types of youth participation activities included are those intended to promote positive youth development, such as foster youth advisory boards, weekend retreats, conferences, and trainings (Fernandez-Alcantara, 2017).

Beginning in 1999, the Foster Care Independence Act (P.L. 109–169) increased the federal funding provided to states for independent living services and provided greater flexibility in how states may use funds. In order for state plans to receive federal approval for funding, the Foster Care Independence Act requires states to demonstrate that foster youth participate directly in designing their own program activities that prepare them for independent living. Collins (2004) argues that the main method used by states to meet this program requirement has been through the development of foster youth advisory boards.

Youth participation in decision-making was further strengthened in 2008 with the passage of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (P.L. 110–351; hereafter referred to as the 'Fostering Connections Act'). In addition to providing partial federal reimbursement to states for the costs of extending foster care from age 18 to age 21,¹ the Fostering Connections Act requires state and/or private agency caseworkers to provide assistance to foster youth in developing a transition plan that is personalized and youth-directed. Though states have flexibility in the implementation of transition planning, the law recommends this be accomplished within 90-days of a young person's 18th birthday. How states facilitate youth-directed transition plans nevertheless remains to a large extent unknown.

An additional push for youth participation is evident in the passage of the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 (P.L. 113–183; hereafter referred to as the Preventing Sex

¹ In order for young people to be eligible for reimbursement, states must show that they are in school, working, in a training program designed to remove obstacles for education or work, or have a condition that precludes the ability to work or be in school.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6833525>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6833525>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)