

VOICES IN TRANSITION: ADOLESCENCE TO ADULTHOOD

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ABSTRACT: Stories related to us by young people in our community-based programs provided the original stimulus for our interest in the perspectives and experiences of youth in transition to adulthood. Such stories have reinforced our belief that the views of young people should have a prominent place in the development of practices, policies, and programs that support young people involved in this life transition. Utilizing a positive youth development philosophy, "Voices in Transition," a community-based project in Kelowna, B.C., has collected information from young people regarding the transitional journey to adulthood. This article presents the knowledge and wisdom of our community youth regarding the adolescence-to-adulthood life transition. Three themes that young people spoke about passionately and frequently are presented in this article. These themes are: belonging and connectedness versus "independence," the importance of supportive relationships with adults throughout transition, and meaningful involvement as the key to building competencies and resilience.

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Key words: positive youth development, adolescence, transition, participatory action research, child and youth care work

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Since 1969, Okanagan Families Society (OFS), a not-for-profit organization, has been offering services to children and families in the Central Okanagan area of British Columbia. The agency works in partnership

with young people and families to promote healthy and positive relationships within families and the community. Okanagan Families endeavours to remain sensitive to the changing needs of children and families and, in collaboration with the community, has assumed the initiative in meeting these needs. Through the provision of innovative and quality programs, OFS has worked to promote healthy children and families through prevention, early intervention, counselling, residential, and youth initiatives.

Since 1988, the Youth Transitions program, a youth initiative through Okanagan Families, has provided support to young people, enhancing the skills necessary for a competent transition to adulthood. The young people involved are between 15 and 19 years of age and in care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Youth Transitions believes in the inherent value of young people and recognizes that they bring unique knowledge and experiences to the program. Utilizing a positive youth development approach, the Youth Transitions program involves young people in all aspects of program planning, development, and evaluation. Together, service providers and participants provide resources that contribute to the continuing evolution of the project.

In 1999, a second youth initiative, the Voices in Transition project, was launched. "Voices" is a community project, which aims to promote greater understanding of the adolescence-to-adulthood transition. This initiative is grounded in participatory action research principles and strategies, and utilized both quantitative and qualitative research methods. It is described by young people as a project that is 'by youth, for youth, and about youth.'

Positive Youth Development

Adherence to a positive youth development approach "derives from the belief that all youths have strengths, and that all are capable of contributions to their families and their communities" (Mallon, 1997, p. 592). Positive youth development not only requires that service providers and programs recognize the inherent value of young people's potential, but also that they help to facilitate the transition to adulthood by providing young people with opportunities to strengthen their assets and build competencies, and to participate in a meaningful way within their community.

Participatory Action Research

The success of research initiatives that have incorporated participation from citizens or organizations within communities has been well documented (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Sarri & Sarri, 1992; Whyte, Greenwood, & Lazes, 1989); however, the practice of participatory action research specifically enacted with young people has not been as well explored. Nonetheless, according to Penuel and Freeman, "this approach is particularly relevant for youth programs that advocate an

'empowerment' or 'collaboration' philosophy" (1997, p.177). These authors emphasize that the goal of participatory action research is to produce findings which will be useful both to the research community and to those who participate in the communities and programs involved.

Such an approach empowers young people by regarding them as the 'experts' on their own life experiences, by encouraging them to share their knowledge with the community, and by providing them with concrete opportunities to promote meaningful change within the community. In addition, the use of a participatory action research strategy serves to strengthen communities by actively involving citizens in addressing their community's specific needs, thereby increasing the likelihood that recommendations for change will be adopted and long-lasting (Sarri & Sarri, 1992).

The Research Focus

The research initiative of the Voices in Transition project utilized the stories of young people in our community to capture vital information about the adolescence-to-adulthood transition experience. Youth and adult project leaders agreed that youth perspectives might assist parents and other community professionals to identify those attitudes and activities that enhance resiliency in youth transitioning to adulthood.

A review of community programs serving youth in transition, as well as conversations with young people and service providers, suggests that the views of parents, professionals, and community leaders, as opposed to the perspectives of young people themselves, tend to inform public attitudes and the philosophy of youth-supporting organizations. A review of the North American literature also reveals that young people's perspectives regarding the adolescence-to-adulthood transition are rarely described. While some studies of this life transition do appear (Arnett, 1997; Greene, Wheatley, & Aldava, 1992; Scheer, Unger, & Brown, 1996), it is generally the views of social scientists, scholars, and social institutions which tend to dominate research studies in this area (Arnett, 1997; Hogan & Astone, 1994; Kohli & Meyer, 1986). Overall, both the professional literature and community supports for young people are characterized by a relative absence of young people's stories about their own experiences in the transition to adulthood.

The conceptions of this life transition held by young people who are either living in, or who have graduated from, child welfare care are also noticeably absent in the professional literature. While a small body of literature documents the experiences of young people exiting care (Raychaba, 1988; Martin & Palmer, 1997), and while professional literature captures the concerns of and consequences for young people unprepared for this transition (Raychaba, 1988; Meston, 1988; Cook, 1994; Martin, 1996; McMillen & Tucker, 1999), the voices of emancipated youth, as well as the voices of youth preparing to exit care, have not been chronicled in a very public way. Therefore, their conceptions of this life transition do not meaningfully inform the strategies and programs aimed at supporting these youth.

Social Constructivism

Increasingly, social scientists are acknowledging that stories provide a significant means of creating meaning and organizing experience. Accordingly, the act of storytelling in and of itself serves to both legitimize and validate personal experience, and to imbue the storyteller with power and authority (Parry & Doan, 1994). Constructivists also hold that the act of storytelling, or translating one's unique lived experiences into narrative, serves the function of communicating knowledge, while situating this knowledge within the larger domain of social processes and exchange (Martin & Sugarman, 1996). As such, constructivism promotes individual agency and diversity, while at the same time illuminating the shared realities of the human experience. As with the tenets of participatory action research, constructivism places an emphasis on empowerment, and incorporates the knowledge and expertise of the population of interest. Through the recollection of one's own autobiographical experiences, constructivism serves to eliminate barriers to the sharing of young people's stories, thereby promoting the belief that each individual is an expert at describing his or her own experiences and realities. Ultimately, constructivism provides a viable foundation for studying youth perspectives through this transitional journey. Collaborations with young people may be fostered by acknowledging the authority with which they relate their own narratives of this life transition.

Over the years, our community youth have told us their stories about growing up, stories about leaving care or leaving home, and stories of young adulthood. For young people, narrative is an effective vehicle for the disclosing of their histories, for the honest presentation of their current selves and realities, and for the expression of future hopes and goals. For adults providing support to young people, storytelling has created many opportunities – the opportunity to truly hear young people, the opportunity to let go of myths that stereotype young people, and the opportunity to find the lessons in youth experience, which build our practice wisdom.

The Research Approach

Consistent with the principles of participatory action research, this research initiative was guided by a youth leadership team comprised of young people from the Central Okanagan who are currently in, or who have already been through, the adolescence-to-adulthood transition. The youth team shared in the leadership of this project. Youth worked with adults to develop and conduct all research activities. Youth leaders advocated within peer and community settings the importance of this project, and were full members of staff hiring and youth selection committees. They recruited research participants, participated in the construction of data collection tools, co-facilitated focus groups, participated in data collection and analysis activities, and evaluated research outcomes (e.g. reports and presentations). The youth leadership team also provided support to research assistants and youth facilitators.

In addition to the youth leadership team, the project was supported by a project resource team. As a community partnership, the project resource team included members from Okanagan University College, the Ministry of Children and Family Development, and Okanagan Families Society. This team was responsible for securing financial and other resources to support the initiative. In addition, it worked closely with the youth leadership team to implement and monitor research activities. Members of the project resource team also provided training and problem-solving resources (e.g. focus group facilitation training) to all members of the research initiative when required. The project team was instrumental in maintaining involvement in this project by eliminating barriers to youth participation (e.g. child care, transportation needs, or other costs). Ultimately, the project resource team's "adult support" strove to ensure that the project remained youth-driven. All youth leadership team participants were considered equal contributors, while adult resource members opted to remain in the background of project activities, acting exclusively as a resource throughout project development and implementation.

THE RESEARCH METHOD

Participants

Young people ages 15-24 participated in this research study. Information was collected from youth in child welfare care, youth in parental care, and young people living in the community. One hundred and fifty-two (152) young people contributed to the research study. The two primary groups of participants were child welfare and non-child welfare youth. Fifty-seven (57) young people in child welfare care and ninety-five (95) young people who had never been in child welfare care or who had emancipated from care formed the participant pool.

Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. Participants' self-identified in response to recruitment strategies implemented at local youth services agencies. In addition, participation was generated from notices posted at local recreation, entertainment and street-level youth centers. Some of the challenges relevant to the primary population of interest included transportation, emotional and/or life style issues, and the ethical considerations involved in the participation of youth in care. Accordingly, participation was by informed consent. All participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time.

Although participation was voluntary, incentives were given to participants in order to encourage them to complete the lengthy survey. Participants who completed the survey were entered in a draw to win prizes that were donated by local merchants. All prizes were nominal and were designed to appeal to young people. Prizes included gift certificates to local pizza places, video stores, and movie theatres. Participants' names were drawn randomly and prizes were distributed shortly after the completed surveys were collected.

Data Collection Methods

Data in this study was collected via surveys (in both written and oral forms), focus groups, program evaluations, and letters. The youth leadership team and the project resource team collaborated on the development of the survey instrument. The survey, however, was designed primarily by young people, with the objective of gathering their stories and experiences about the transition to adulthood. The study was designed to provide the community with a stronger understanding of what becoming an adult means to young people. The intent of the instrument was to provide opportunities for youth to be heard, and to share their experiences regarding services, supports, and attitudes within their community. The survey was nine pages in length and designed to provide young people with the opportunity to write in detail about their thoughts and feelings. The survey took from fifteen minutes to one hour to complete. It included questions that reflected demographic information, issues that arose during transition, and youths' experiences when talking with adults. Other questions reflected young peoples' experiences within the community, what they need to become competent adults, and their attitudes regarding a successful transition. Participants who agreed to complete the survey were given the choice of completing it independently, or of having the survey questions administered orally and responses recorded by a trained youth interviewer. This option was provided to ensure that those participants who were challenged by reading comprehension or written fluency still had the opportunity to participate in the survey.

Participants for focus groups were recruited from survey respondents who agreed to be contacted for further data collection. Facilitators for the focus groups were recruited from the youth leadership team and trained by members of the project resource team. The groups were approximately 1-2 hours in length, and were held in settings highly accessible to and comfortable for participants. Refreshments were offered, and transportation costs were covered on an as-needed basis by the project resource team. Members of the project resource team and the youth facilitator collaborated in generating themes to discuss with the group based on all 3 data collection methods including surveys, program evaluations, and letters. Focus groups provided the forum to discuss emerging themes, such as the desire for more freedom or feelings about increased responsibility, at length. Ultimately, the youth facilitator and the participants determined the direction of the discussion. Young people who participated in the focus groups were given an opportunity to vocalize their feelings openly and honestly about the adolescence-to-adulthood transition. The discussion that was generated provided project leaders with the opportunity to substantiate the accuracy of their thematic findings. The facilitator's notes were completed immediately following the sessions to increase the likelihood of complete and accurate transcriptions.

Other forms of data collected included program evaluations completed by young people in child welfare care; these youth were participants in Okanagan Families' Youth Transitions program. In addition, some young people felt compelled to write unsolicited letters to their counsellors either during the transition support, or following the completion of the program. The content of these letters was also used as data in this study.

Challenges

Various issues and challenges evolved throughout the development and implementation of the project. Members of the youth leadership team were presented with the unique challenge of being treated as equals to the adult members of the project. Their values and opinions were respected and encouraged by the project resource team. They were given responsibilities that included the design and distribution of the survey, as well as seeking out fundraising and developing community contacts to support the survey distribution. For the project resource team, a challenge included "not rescuing," as the youth leadership team struggled to acknowledge its own competence. The teams' respect and faith in the abilities of one another eventually overcame these obstacles.

Another challenge experienced by both teams included keeping the youth involved and interested in the project. During the time it took to develop and distribute the survey, some youth moved away, while others moved on to post-secondary education or became employed and had limited spare time to devote to the project. Occasionally, members of the youth leadership team had difficulty maintaining a forward momentum, and became 'stuck' in decision-making on certain aspects of the project (e.g. survey content, survey length, etc.). At times, some members became overwhelmed by the broad scope of the project, by the turn-around time needed for some activities to continue, and by the responsibilities of making decisions without adults imposing their own views on the process. This challenge was alleviated by encouragement from the project resource team for the youth members to maintain their sense of leadership around project activities, thereby empowering the youth to move forward. Indeed it was a priority to ensure that all youth involved felt a sense of ownership of the project.

A further challenge involved the distribution of the survey. The survey, in its entirety, was lengthy, and finding appropriate venues to distribute it also proved daunting. As previously mentioned, this challenge was resolved by offering survey participants the chance of winning prizes donated by local merchants, and by developing rapport with local community organizations where youth could be found.

Finally, one of the greatest difficulties faced by the project members included that faced by most researchers: the time it took to develop, implement, and receive ethical approval of the proposed project. Young people showed admirable patience and faith in the project, which allowed them to tolerate the lengthy time it took to move forward and gain the necessary approval to implement the research.

Data Analysis Strategies

Where possible, both quantitative and qualitative data analysis were used to manage the large volume of data gathered in this study. Members of the youth leadership and project resource teams comprised the "expert panel" and analyzed information generated from surveys, focus groups, program evaluations, and letters. Using a consensus process, a thematic analysis determined the central or dominant themes outlined in this article.

THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Young people requested that findings and conclusions be delivered in their voice. As one young woman commented, "There is pride in feeling valued as a young person. Value is communicated through adults who encourage us to express our knowledge and opinions, and who give that knowledge and opinion credence and merit." Young people and researchers agreed that one way to give merit to the wisdom of young people is to use their words when communicating the findings of research. Therefore, these findings are presented in what we called a "blended voice."

Both researchers and young people analyzed the stories submitted. Three recurring themes, which young people spoke of with great passion, came to light. According to those interviewed: "Independence" is not the goal, nor does it represent the reality of the transitional experience. Contrary to popular opinion, young people value the support of adults, especially when relationships are based on equality and friendship. Transition has more to do with enhancing strengths and competencies than with "success."

Belonging and Connectedness Versus "Independence"

The language of youth-supporting professionals in our community suggests that they construct transition as "independence." Transition programs have names like "Independent Living." Professionals describe young people in transition programs as "youth becoming independent." The concept of independence for many professionals and program administrators in our community is consistent with generic dictionary definitions, specifically, as: "not needing, wanting, or getting help from others; not connected to others" (Gage Canadian Dictionary, 2000). Yet young people themselves do not see transition this way. What we heard from young people is that the transition to adulthood is a process of assuming increasing responsibility for their own life choices and experiences. Being more responsible, self-reliant, and mature does not mean being unattached or disconnected from others. Rather, young people view the transition experience as a time for taking advantage of the opportunities within their world to develop the attributes required for competent adulthood.

Young people see this transition experience as being about competence; therefore, partnerships with adults and peers are critical during the transition process. Young people say that without such relationships, they experience transition alone—and alone means isolation. Young people in child welfare care placed particular emphasis on this theme, because their lives had already been characterized by loss of "place," unresolved past and present relationship issues, and unmet developmental needs for belonging, connectedness, and competence-building opportunities. As one young man stated, "When you are a teenager and living on your own, learning things and taking care of yourself is just too hard."

The Importance of Supportive Relationships with Adults Throughout Transition

This was the most frequently voiced theme in youth stories. Young people repeatedly stated that they value relationships with adults during the transition experience. Young people desire relationships with those adults and service providers who have relinquished the social stereotype suggesting that young people do not want adults in their lives. Further, young people value relationships with adults when relationships are continuous, stable, and available both during and after program involvement or time in care. As a 17-year-old young woman said of a Youth Transitions counsellor, "Anytime I needed her, she was there for me, and helped me with decision-making. If I needed help with anything she supported me, even when she wasn't working."

Young people believe that the transition to adulthood is an individual experience. In the words of one young person, "Some of us are ready at 19, and if we are, let us go." On the other hand, some young people require support and services for many years. In such cases, young people agree that, when seeking support or assistance, they return to the relationships, which best meet their needs and enhance their competence. Thus, there is a desire for relationships that continue beyond program completion. Young people request that youth-supporting professionals be available when "they need support, not just during work hours." They also believe that policymakers and program administrators must stop thinking that an arbitrary age (e.g. 19) equals adulthood.

Young people identified several qualities that contribute to the development of supportive and competence-building relationships with adults. Young people agree, "It is all about respect." They stated that adults who are respectful, who are patient and understanding, who truly listen, who see youth as people they can learn from, and who are competent and confidential, build relationships with young people that sustain them during transition. The following is an example of the qualities valued by one young man when he was asked about relationships between young people and adults. He said:

You need patience. I worked in partnership with my foster parent; he hired me to work with him. He slowly taught me things,

and I observed, and then one time he let me do it myself. I messed up, but he said, "That happens. Practice makes perfect." He didn't freak on me and say, "You screwed up!"

Young people described adults who truly listen as adults who communicate reassurance and empathy, who are tolerant of their style of voice, and who view the issues of young people not as problems, but as part of another life transition. As an 18-year-old young man commented, "Youth need to know that they can ask for help without putting their adulthood in jeopardy. Most youth won't admit that they are becoming adults. They will insist that they are adults, and will instinctively avoid anything that puts their adulthood into doubt." Asking young people their views on issues, caring about what they are going through, seeing issues as part of a life transition and not as problems, communicating faith in the young person's ability to figure it out and turn out alright – these are all communication characteristics that young people seek when talking with adults "without jeopardy."

Most importantly, young people want adults in their lives who are comfortable with being friends. Several youth told us that: "You need your counsellor to be your friend." "What makes you who you are, are your friends." "If adults want to be there [in a relationship], they'll make us want to be there too." For young people, being a friend means being a role model, a mentor, a teacher, and an advocate. Being a friend is also being someone who is there for them now, and in the future, regardless of where their future takes them. Friendship is about partnership in transition.

Meaningful Involvement as the Key to Building Competencies and Resilience

The final theme captured young people's desire for involvement and opportunity. Young people appreciate being involved with their families, schools, and communities in meaningful ways. Such involvement plays a significant role in the building of assets, skills, and resilience. The involvement of young people in programs and projects that support the transition to adulthood must be greater than simply that of "recipient of service." Young people involved in the "Voices" project stated that meaningful involvement meant participation "in key structures like the hiring of staff, having control over significant work, and sharing power." Young people in the Youth Transitions program have expressed it as "involvement in program planning and decision-making, and having true choice." They spoke of how competencies were built not only by achieving the expected program outcomes, but also by the nature and process of their participation. As one youth stated, "During my two years [in the Youth Transitions program], I have gone from being shy, introverted and depressed, to being more expressful and confident. I feel that my heightened emotional stability plays a significant role in managing my life."

Another youth commented, "I learned how to deal with my emotions, to deal with the past and the present. I basically learned how to get a grip on life."

Meaningful involvement builds tangible assets and skills. As one young man noted of his meetings with his Youth Transitions counsellor, "I looked forward to our weekly outings...They were a time to go to the bank and carefully budget the money in our joint bank account, to go grocery shopping and make wise choices, or to do anything I wanted to accomplish." Significant involvement should allow young people to take risks, try new experiences, and practice the skills related to competent adulthood within an atmosphere of unconditional support. Young people expect that meaningful involvement allows for trial and error learning and for failure without judgment. Involvement is not about success, rather, it is about opportunity to develop competence for adult living.

Through their stories, young people described opportunities which develop competence. They indicated very strongly that opportunities that involve high expectations, experiential learning, fun, and personal discovery, contribute greatly to the building of skills and the resilience needed for adulthood roles and responsibilities. Opportunities available to young people must be convenient (e.g. occur at times which "work" for young people), and barriers to participation, such as childcare or the cost of transportation, must be overcome. Opportunities also need to be challenging, and to involve risk-taking, decision-making, and making and learning from mistakes. One young woman passionately reported:

I never thought I would get past all the pain in my life so I could move forward and become the best that I could be. I really believed my life to be doomed. This program has been the very best thing ever to happen in my life. It gave me the tools to move forward into the future...It has been hard in the real world, but I now have the strength to deal with it and get through it. I know that any time I need advice or help in the future they are still here.

OUR CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The young people who participated in this project have articulated a number of pertinent themes and ideas of special interest to parents and service providers working with youth in transition to adulthood. According to participants, youth in transition do, in fact, value the support and input of adults, but only when offered on a basis of equality, respect, and mutual friendship. They suggest that we modify our often unrealistic expectations, and focus on the present as opposed to the future. They also suggest that practical and concrete skills be emphasized at an earlier age. In addition, they stress, reaching the age of majority should not disenfranchise those who are still in need of support.

In conclusion, young people enhance assets and skills, and build resilience, when transitioning in partnership with adults. However, those adults must view the transition from adolescence to adulthood as a posi-

tive, albeit challenging time, provide support and opportunities for young people, and believe that young people are integral to the development of their community. These capacities enable young people to "stand firm [with]in the community," to have their voices heard and acknowledged, and to know that their "voice and opinions matter."

Young People's Wisdom

Young people involved in this project requested their comments be given to adults as recommendations, and further, that these recommendations be given in their voice. Some names used are aliases chosen by the young people themselves.

Be Our Friend

"Just be honest and straight up...Don't try and act cool. Treat kids like you would your friends." Wrenfar, 21

Talk to youth at the 'same level', not in a condescending or superior manner." Dee, 20

Believe in Us

"Take kids...seriously. Try to think in terms of the present and less about the future. Problems affecting them now, instead of how it will affect them when they grow up. Pay attention to what they are, instead of what they might be." Sytel, 18

"I have found that the more I get to know who I am, and to love who I am, I stand firm in the community. My voice and opinions matter." Nicole, 20

Create Opportunities for Young People

"Teach them life skills at an earlier age. Give them more responsibilities so they'll know how to deal with it when they're on their own. Don't hand them everything on a silver platter (like I was). Teach them respect for others, budgeting, cooking. Show them how to house find..." D.D., 18

Adulthood is not an Arbitrary Age

"I do not like the term 'becoming an adult'. I know 40 year-olds who are not independent. Do you call them adults? I was independent at 10; was I an adult?

Specifically, there is no definition for an 'adult'. I was a child at 10, but fully an adult." Katrina, 16

Looking to the Future

We would like to conclude with a comment from a young man who voiced his personal hopes for the future. It is our hope that others will respond to this young man's challenge by renewing their commitment to

youth in transition. For the youth and adult leaders of the "Voices" project, a renewed commitment means providing the support that makes a difference for youth, working in partnership with young people to create competence-building opportunities, and adopting a positive youth development approach to all interactions and experiences involving young people in your communities:

"What I want to know is, is anything going to change as a result of what we're doing? Maybe after this, some kids won't have to go through what we went through as kids. They can learn from our experiences." Michael, 17

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