



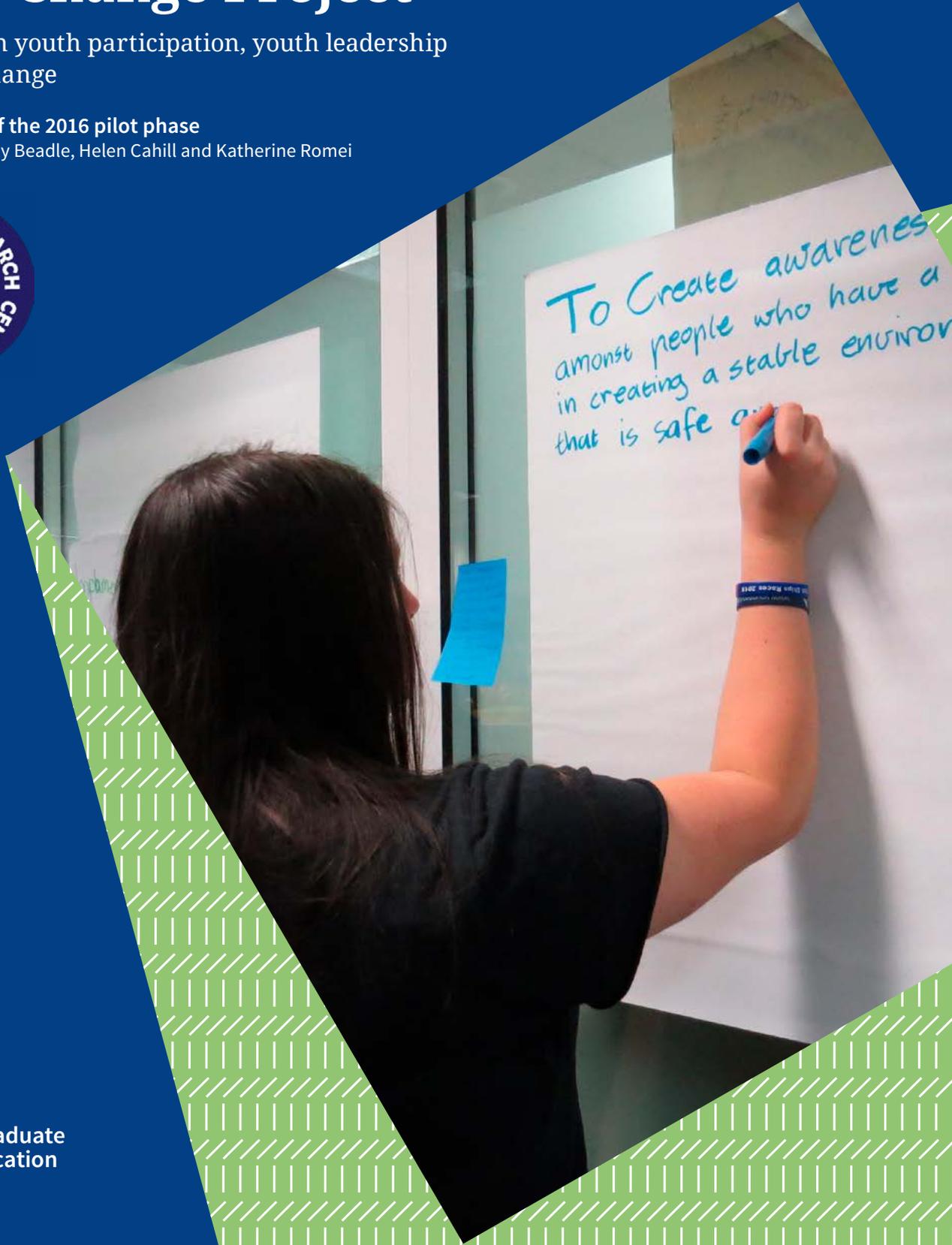
THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

The Y-Change Project

Innovation in youth participation, youth leadership
and social change

An evaluation of the 2016 pilot phase

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At the Youth Research Centre we acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation. We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the lands on which our centre is located and where we conduct our research and teaching. We pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past, present and future.

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Introduction

In 2016, the Berry Street Childhood Institute commissioned the Youth Research Centre (University of Melbourne) to undertake a research and evaluation project examining the effectiveness of their new youth leadership and social change program – Y-Change.

Y-Change is a pilot initiative developed by the Berry Street Childhood Institute. It aims to provide opportunities for a range of young people who have experienced disadvantage to contribute as leaders, change agents and advisors on matters affecting young people experiencing disadvantage. Young people were recruited through Berry Street services and a network of three Referral Partner Organisations: Mirabel Foundation, Youth Support & Advocacy Service (YSAS), and the Broadmeadows Education First Youth Foyer.

Berry Street is a Victorian non-government organisation providing a suite of services to support children, young people and families with complex needs arising from experiences of abuse, neglect or violence. They are a major provider of out-of-home care services across Victoria, including foster, kinship and residential care.

The Y-Change initiative is premised on the understanding that young people are the experts of their own experiences and that not only services, but society as a whole benefits when young people are active, empowered participants. This initiative reflects the recognition that participation of young people within the systems that support them makes for better policy and practice, and addresses the growing urgency to ensure that young people participate in a systematic way.

Opportunities for civic contribution are rarely provided for young people who experience disadvantage, including those in out-of-home care, homeless young people, migrant and refugee young people, Indigenous young people, and those with a criminal or substance abuse history. These and many other young people can experience barriers to full participation in education, employment, and community, and are rarely offered opportunities to lead, advocate or play a role in advancing the services and institutions that affect their lives.

The number of children in out-of-home care has increased over the last 15 to 20 years, and has almost trebled from just over 14,000 in 1997 to around 44,000 in 2015 [1]. Of these, the majority (81%) have been in care for one year or more [1]. When children enter out-of-home care, they are most likely to be placed with a relative or a member of their kinship group (47% in 2015) or in foster care (40% in 2015). Others are placed in residential care (5% in 2015) or other arrangements [1].

Children and young people in care typically have experienced serious disadvantage and trauma early in life. They may face a number of difficulties arising from the circumstances that led them to being removed from their parents, as well as the emotional effects of being separated from their parents and family [2]. As a result, many have multiple support needs, including social and mental health difficulties.

While child and youth welfare organisations might silo the different ‘forms’ of adversity, these are actually not mutually exclusive in the lives of young people and there are commonalities in the experiences across the board. For example, a range of Australian and international studies highlight the range of challenges disproportionately faced by children and young people in care, including higher rates of illness (physical and mental) and disability, higher rates of teenage pregnancy, risk-taking behaviour and self-harm [3-5], and it is also well noted that children in care often face a difficult transition to independent living [3, 6].

Understanding children and young people’s experiences of disadvantage and the factors that lead to better and to poorer outcomes is critical to developing better policies and practices [2]. Young people who have experienced disadvantage are in a unique position to be able to reflect on their experiences and offer valuable insights into system reform. Through Y-Change, Berry Street Childhood Institute seeks to explore new models of youth participation as a means of improving service provision and ensuring that programs and services are relevant, engaging, and responsive to children and young people’s needs.

What is Y-Change?

The Berry Street Childhood Institute believes that young people have a key role to play in leading change within and beyond their organisation. The Institute has a commitment to encourage and support youth participation in all aspects of their work. But as is well noted in the research literature, the 'how' of engaging young people is complex and there is wide debate about what constitutes good practice. This is the case both in terms of how to engage young people and what to do with what they say.

As such, Berry Street set out to explore ways of creating spaces for young people who have experienced disadvantage to provide input and influence into their organisation and the broader sector. In 2016, the Berry Street Childhood Institute introduced the Y-Change program as a means of exploring new models of engaging young people in the organisation and in the youth welfare sector more generally. This first year of implementation was seen as a pilot year in which the young people selected to engage in the program were to work as a team to provide reflections, directions and feedback in order to shape future youth initiatives, including the ongoing Y-Change initiative.

Y-Change is a youth leadership and social change pilot project. It aims to empower young people who have experienced disadvantage to share their experiences and their voices in the pursuit of improved care and support of children and young people experiencing adversity now and into the future. The program trains young people in skills such as public speaking, media and communications, workshop facilitation, and offers paid employment opportunities to use these skills, both within Berry Street and in other youth-serving organisations.

Y-Change has opened a space to explore innovation in youth participation and has initiated processes through which to reflect on the project – both in terms of the experience for the young people involved and the organisational response.

This report presents findings from this reflective process as well as broader reflections on considerations for youth engagement and participation. It provides a range of insights regarding the potential of innovative and meaningful engagement and empowerment of young people who have experienced disadvantage in a service setting.

Context: Child and youth participation in the systems that support young people

Hearing from children about the *conditions in which they live* matters because without establishing how children see these issues, and getting clarity on what they want and need, it is not possible to get an accurate account of the problems which the policy or practice address [7].

The benefits of providing meaningful opportunities for young people to participate in service-delivery settings, policy-development and more broadly in their communities is increasingly recognised. This is based on a belief that young people can and do make valuable contributions to communities, particularly when permitted and empowered to do so. In the context of service delivery settings, the meaningful engagement of children and young people can equip services to better understand the experiences and needs of the clients they serve and thus make more accurate and relevant decisions [7-10]. While adult professionals and carers will have some idea of the conditions that their clients experience, a client-centric model cannot fully develop without directly including the contributions of the clients themselves [7, 8]. There is also growing recognition of children and young people's right to participate in decisions which directly affect them [7, 11, 12]. Additionally, children and young people themselves *want* to be listened to [7, 10, 13] and find that opportunities to participate enhance their resilience and wellbeing, and promote dignity and self-worth, enabling them to believe in their ability to create change and have control over elements of their lives [7, 9, 10, 14-16]. Thus, the opportunity to express one's views and inform relevant decisions has value in and of itself.

In this context, many commentators have noted the importance of supporting children and young people to develop skills and tools that enable them to actively engage within their communities and in organisations working with and for children and youth. Governments and agencies in Australian and other OECD countries have sought to create policies and mechanisms for the participation of children and youth [9, 17]. For example, Australia's first national framework for Child Protection, launched in 2009, explicitly identified children's right to participate or to be consulted in the decisions that affect their lives.

Farthing (2012) identified four common justifications for youth participation (and provides critiques of these justifications). These are:

- Human rights: Articles 12, 13 and 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child state that children and young people have the same rights to participate or to be heard as adults; have the right to freedom of expression (including the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas).
- Participation as radical empowerment: Participation requires power sharing and can shift the balance of power between the generations and provide marginalised or oppressed young people greater control and more power.
- Participation for efficiency in policy/practice/services: Youth participation produces more informed and relevant policy or practice.
- Youth development: By engaging in processes such as decision-making, young people can learn the social and emotional skills necessary to succeed as adults.

Alongside the literature highlighting the importance of child and youth participation, there is debate about what constitutes best practice in terms of how to facilitate participation and accomplish meaningful participation and engagement [7, 18]. Many commentators draw attention to the structural obstacles to the participation of young people, including those faced by young people in out-of-home care. Several challenges are well noted in the research literature.

Firstly, there is commonly noted discrepancy between what is intended and/or written into organisational policy. For example, the expressed intention to meaningfully engage young people may not be translated into practice, with few structures provided through which to listen to and give effect to the voices of young people [7, 19-21]. In other words, many organisations have difficulty in translating their commitment to participation into an ongoing and embedded practice [9, 22].

Sometimes a stated commitment to participation translates only to tokenistic opportunities for contribution. While there can be no universal recipe for youth participation, as participatory programs should be responsive to context and purpose and good practice can take many forms, many initiatives are criticised for being cursory, with the young people having little if any real voice in discussions and decision-making.

A common example of this is to bring a few young people in for consultation, but then to fail either to provide them a chance to consult more widely with those who they are asked to represent, or to fail to use the advice given, or to report back about why their contributions did not influence decisions or outcomes. It is possible, as pointed out by Bessell [9], that policies and practices that promise participation but fail to deliver may do more harm than good for those directly involved.

Additionally, when organisations open up spaces for young people's engagement and participation, they may only reach and engage a limited or elite cross-section of young people. Opportunities to participate may be least accessible for those young people who have experienced disadvantage or marginalisation. This means that young people who have experienced, or are experiencing disadvantage may be the least likely to get access to opportunities to lead or push for social change, or to inform decisions on matters that affect them.

For example, within the out-of-home care service context specifically, there is a growing body of literature exploring opportunities and challenges for child and youth participation. Some have emphasised the particular importance of participation opportunities for children and young people in care, given that so many of the decisions shaping their lives and wellbeing are made by strangers and through bureaucratic processes [9]. Many point to the dearth of opportunities that are available for children and young people to raise their voice within the service system [7, 9, 18, 23]. For example Bessell's research with 28 young Australians who had experienced out-of-home care in Australia found that they were rarely consulted, and that when they were, they felt that their views were neither valued nor acted upon [9].

There is a consistent call in the youth participation literature for identification of good-practice and what works. In other words, how can services and other stakeholders involve young people in change processes in ways that draw on young people's strengths, perspectives and commitment, and are meaningful, useful and empowering for the young people themselves? In exploring this important question, Bessant and Broadley (2014) argue the need for an attitudinal shift in the ways that children and their views are valued. This, they argue, would require public awareness campaigns as well as education for current and pre-service practitioners and policy-makers. This would need to be partnered with process official guidelines for gaining access to children and acting appropriately on what they say [7].

Within the sociological literature, there is discussion about the importance of considering the 'positioning' of children and youth within participation programs [24]. The concept of positioning is more extensive than that of role. The word role refers to duties – or what people get to do. The term position refers to who people get to be. When programmers consider the positioning of young people, they consider matters such as the relative power dynamic and the associated storylines about who or what it is possible for young people to be or to become [25]. As argued by Cahill et al (2015), when young people are positioned as contributors, possibilities can be created for them to work with and for others, as well as for their own benefit. When young people are positioned as teachers, they are provided with the opportunity to share the knowledge they have developed from their lived experience. When young people are positioned as solution-builders, they are invited to analyse problems and fashion and take responsibility for thinking through the viability of solutions. Thus positioning informs the nature of the participation.

It is important to interrupt limiting stereotypes held about young people when creating opportunities for youth participation. This is particularly so for young people who have experienced disadvantage, for they are the people most likely to be labeled or understood through some category of vulnerability or risk and therefore least likely to be positioned as contributors, partners or leaders. When young people are chiefly understood through their vulnerability, they tend to be positioned as recipients, rather than as partners. This may lead to programs being designed to 'help' or to protect them, rather than to work in partnership with them [26].

Additionally the way in which young people are positioned can also be internalised and have an impact on the young person's concept of who they are and who they can become [11, 27]. This can lead to loss of confidence or poor self-concept. Cahill and colleagues (2015) emphasise the importance of positioning young people as partners in change efforts [28]. This requires that they be involved in creating solutions, not just in identifying problems, regardless of their previous history. As partners in collective change efforts, they can be positioned simultaneously as experts, leaders, learners, supporters and change-makers.

The Y-Change program is consistent with this model in that it has presumed that young people have valuable contributions to make at every phase of the program, and consequently has sought to position young people as programming partners as well as program recipients.

Using a youth participation framework for analysis

A range of different models are available to assist people to plan for and evaluation youth participation. One well-known model is Roger Hart's Ladder of Youth Participation (1992). It presents a hierarchy of involvement from tokenism to citizenship. The model has been praised as a tool for checking whether participation is meaningful and is often used as a tool within evaluation. However this model has also been critiqued as unnecessarily hierarchical and for not paying sufficient attention to the ways in which differences in project, situational or cultural context can influence what is considered meaningful as participation. This model can result in people assuming that one size fits all, regardless of age, circumstance, and context.

Farthing (2012) argues that youth participation is not inherently a 'good thing' in and of itself. Rather the methodology needs to be carefully devised to ensure that participation actually benefits the young people themselves. Holdsworth (2001) argues "*Participation is a verb, rather than a noun*". Typologies alone "are insufficient to address tensions in children and young people's participation and to assist in moving this participation forward" [29].

Cahill (2016) provides a model to assist programmers in their efforts to plan for effective child and youth participation. The framework she proposes describes six interconnected domains that are relevant to all modes of participation and crucial for consideration in planning or evaluating meaningful, inclusive and ethical participation. These six domains are:

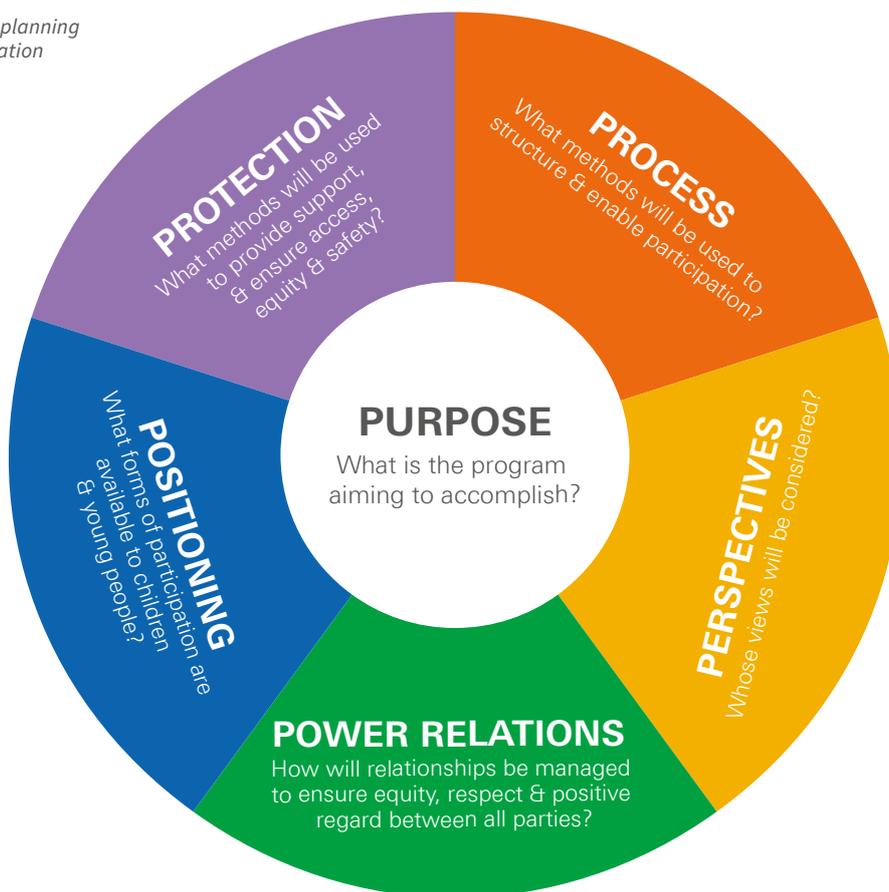
1. Purpose: Ask - *What was the program aiming to accomplish and to what extent did it achieve this?*
2. Process: Ask - *What methods were used to structure and enable participation?*
3. Positioning: Ask - *How were the young people positioned, and what forms of participation were made available to the young people as a result of this positioning?*
4. Protection: Ask - *What methods were used to provide support, and ensure access & safety?*
5. Perspectives: Ask - *Whose views were considered, and how were multiple perspectives invited?*
6. Power relations: Ask - *How were relationships managed to ensure equity, respect and positive regard between all parties?*

Cahill (2016) argues that a focus on all six domains can help those planning for participation to think critically and practically about how to work *with* rather than just *for* or *about* children and young people.

The Framework below shows each domain and the relevant corresponding questions to be asked when considering activity in that domain¹.

¹ More detail on the model can be found on the Youth Research Centre website: http://education.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/2207373/Cahill-2016-Model-for-Child-and-Youth-Participation.pdf

Figure 1. Framework for planning child and youth participation



Framework designed by: Professor Helen Cahill (2016)

PURPOSE – What was the program aiming to accomplish and to what extent did it achieve this?

PROCESS – What methods were used to structure and enable participation?

POSITIONING – How were the young people positioned, and what forms of participation were made available to the young people as a result of this positioning?

PROTECTION – What methods were used to provide support, and ensure access and safety?

PERSPECTIVES – Whose views were considered, and how were multiple perspectives invited?

POWER RELATIONS – How were relationships managed to ensure equity, respect and positive regard between all parties?

Introducing Y-Change

Y-Change emerged out of a process of exploration, consultation and learning over three years. This process was largely led by a group of three young people – Crystal, Damian and Lily - who came together with a shared passion for change in the systems that supported them and their peers at critical times in their lives.

Crystal, Damian and Lily met Berry Street's Senior Advisor for Youth Engagement Lauren Oliver at the 2012 *Connect for Improving Outcomes for Victoria's Young People* conference run by YACVic and the Department of Education, Employment and Training. Lauren ran the Youth stream in which Crystal, Damian and Lily (real names used with permission) were participating. A group of 10 emerged from the youth stream of the conference wanting to continue to work together to influence policy and practice. They formed a group that continued to be called Youth Stream and, although none of them were Berry Street clients, Lauren worked alongside them as a coordinator/guide. In the following year, the group met every one to two months to brainstorm ideas and come up with a plan. However they struggled to come together on a single, manageable idea. As a result the numbers fell to three, but this core group began to develop an idea for how to build the capacity of young people to do change-making work. During this process Lauren provided structure and guidance, and was mentored by Crystal, Lily and Damian on what young people really need and want out of a program that elevates their potential. Crystal, Lily and Damian became peer-mentors in the Y-Change pilot program.

The Y-Change pilot program was based on the recognition that young people who have particular experiences possess expertise because of their lived experiences of systems, practices and policies, and can make a valuable contribution to positive organisational and system change. Y-Change aimed to elevate the expertise of these young people (aged 16-25) so that it is recognised to be as valuable as the expertise of the professionals, bureaucrats and academics who currently define the systems that care for and support them.

Y-Change was a year-long social change and leadership initiative with two interconnected components: training and employment.

Target group

Y-Change is targeted at young people aged 16-25 who have been in contact with the out of home care system and/or have experience of disadvantage. Applicants were required to be a current or ex-client of Berry Street, Mirabel Foundation, Education First Youth Foyer or Youth Substance Abuse Service.

Potential participants were invited to apply to participate via contact with Berry Street and a range of other organisations who work with young people who have experienced disadvantage. Applicants underwent a full application and interview process intended to mirror traditional employment processes. The position description described the following as the key selection criteria and the young people were chosen based on these:

- Be able to independently manage things like travel and getting to places on time;
- Be ready to step up and be heard;
- Be ready and able to take on a challenge;
- Be interested in learning new skills;
- Have the capacity to do some class-based learning.

The total capacity of the pilot program, in order to be able to provide opportunities to all the young people involved, was 15. The program received 14 applications, 11 recruited to training and 7 went through to employment. Recruitment was in November and December 2015, Orientation camp was in January 2016, training ran from February to May 2016 and employment began in May the same year.

Two applicants were not successful at the interview stage. The English of one of the applicants was not high enough for her to fully engage in the whole program and the other opted out after the first interview. Four young people were recruited to the training but did not make the step from training to employment. Of these four, three were unable to commit to the training schedule and ended up missing all sessions, or so many that they did not qualify (there was a 75% attendance requirement), and a fourth self-selected out for several reasons, including disinterest in the subject matter and dyslexia that made it hard for him to engage with some of the materials (according to the program manager).

Young Changemaker

Job No: **Berry916**
Location: **Richmond, VIC**

If you are 16-25 years old, have faced some major challenges in your life, and you want to play a role in advocating for change in the systems that support young people...

You just might be the expert we're looking for!

Over twelve months you will learn how to use your knowledge and experiences to step up as a leader, advocate for yourself and others, and campaign on issues that are important to you.

You will receive three months of training in leadership and social change skills and when you complete the training you will be offered the chance to be employed for nine months by Berry Street, working on projects, events and ideas that exercise your new skills.

Y-Change is about your development and your voice. The Berry Street Childhood Institute needs experts like you to help lead the way!

Please click on these links to view ['What can I expect to be doing?'](#) and the [Position Description](#)

Figure 2: The advertisement for positions within the Y-Change program from Berry Street's website

Y-Change components: Training, Advocacy and Employment

Training: Participants engaged in weekly training sessions over three months run by Lauren Oliver, and number of other professional trainers and facilitators. The training aimed to develop leadership and social change skills, specifically covering the following areas:

- Public speaking (3 weeks)
- Facilitation (3 weeks)
- Media (3 weeks)
- Campaigning & activism (3 weeks)

Each training area was comprised of three workshops of five hours each (over three weeks) – 15 hours on each area in total. The training aimed to build the young people’s capacity. Acknowledging that they are experts of their own experience, it sought to build on their existing skills and knowledge and equip them with transferable skills that will enable them to engage in different settings. The training provided involved a combination of class time, guest expert presentations/activities, experiential visits and externally-provided workshops that add to the in-house training. The training schedule created for the program participants is detailed below:

Date	Activity
Oct 26th 2016	Applications opened
Nov 15th 2016	Applications closed
Nov 20th-30th 2016	First interviews
Nov 30th-Dec 7th 2016	Second Interviews
Jan 11th-13th 2016	Orientation Camp
Feb 3rd-12th 2016	Public Speaking Training
Feb 27th-Apr 2nd 2016	Facilitation Training
Apr 9th-23rd 2016	Media Training
Apr 30th-May 14th 2016	Campaigning & Activism Training
May 15th 2016	Employment contracts began
June 23rd 2016	Graduation

Figure 3: The 2016 Y-Change schedule of training and events

Advocacy: Towards the end of the training, the group had a session on advocacy and activism exploring questions such as ‘What is advocacy? What is activism? And who is an advocate?’ Young Changemakers identified issues that they felt passionate about and would like to advocate for. While this period of the program had originally been intended as a period of developing a campaign, the group reframed this part of the program to focus on the advocacy work they could undertake as part of their employment.

Employment: Following completion of the training program, the Young Changemakers were employed by Berry Street and invited to engage in a range of opportunities to exercise their new skills. Opportunities included speaking engagements, conference presentations, workshop facilitation, staff training development and delivery, project development and campaigning events through which to practice their learned skills.

Reflection and Co-Creation days

The Y-Change Reflection and Co-Creation days were a series of four sessions where participants were provided the opportunity to engage in rich reflective practices. The Y-Change Reflection Sessions had three specific purposes for participants:

1. To better understand and build on their own experience and learning from Y-Change
2. To develop skills and knowledge in facilitating and running programs through participation and “learning through doing”
3. To offer feedback and a critique of the Y-Change program as a whole to support its improvement for future years.

These sessions allowed the participants to talk back to the program and reflect, and acted as a form of process evaluation and monitoring for the project. The Reflection and Co-Creation days also encouraged the participants to engage in critical thinking about the challenges they encountered in the project and the strategies that could be employed to create solutions.

Evaluating the 2016 Y-Change Pilot

In 2016, there were 7 participants in the Y-Change project – 4 females and 3 males – aged between 18-23. Participants came from a range of backgrounds. As well as being participants in the program, from the outset these young people were purposely positioned as key informants invited to give feedback on the process in order to strengthen the model for the next round of participants.



What have we been doing? Output from a Reflection and Co-Creation day.

Questions:

This evaluation sought to answer the following key questions:

- What are the key elements of the program?
- Did Y-Change succeed in its goals?
- What are the benefits to stakeholders (staff and participants) of the program?
- Did young people understand themselves and their potential differently?
- What are the learning outcomes from the program pilot and how could the program improve its capacity to achieve its objectives?

Ethics

The research had full ethics approval from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee. Participants were informed their interviews would be anonymous to ensure their confidentiality.

Given that Y-Change was underpinned by a commitment to respect the value of the expertise that young people derive from their experiences, the evaluators sought to involve the participants as active and critical contributors to this formal evaluation process. The youth participants were key in providing feedback, and their voices have been privileged in this document as much as possible.

This research uses a qualitative approach to explore the questions above. Seven young people engaged in the Y-Change project in 2016, one peer mentor and a number of Berry Street staff members were involved in the evaluation. As the 2016 Y-Change project was a pilot there was only a small numbers of participants but nonetheless a rich set of data was collected.

Methods

A range of methods was used to collect data, including:

- In-depth semi-structured interviews with the Y-Change participants. All Y-Change youth participants were interviewed at least once during the program, and three participants were interviewed twice with 5 months between the interviews.
- Two in-depth semi-structured interviews with Y-Change co-creator and staff member Lauren Oliver
- One in-depth semi-structure interview with a Y-Change peer mentor
- Data collected from young people involved in four reflection and co-creation days. These days provided opportunities for participants to provide ongoing feedback and shape the evolution of the program.
- Feedback collected from Berry Street Executive staff members who attended a seminar involving Y-Change participants in March 2016.

Findings

This report uses Cahill's (2016) 6P model as a structure within which to conduct the evaluation. Hence the domains and questions that guided the evaluation are as follows:

PURPOSE – What was the program aiming to accomplish and to what extent did it achieve this?

PROCESS – What methods were used to structure and enable participation?

POSITIONING – How were the young people positioned, and what forms of participation were made available to the young people as a result of this positioning?

PROTECTION – What methods were used to provide support, and ensure access and safety?

PERSPECTIVES – Whose views were considered, and how were multiple perspectives invited?

POWER RELATIONS – How were relationships managed to ensure equity, respect and positive regard between all parties?

The findings section of the evaluation is divided into these six headings. Many of the examples used in each domain intertwine and overlap into other domains, demonstrating the importance of considering all six together. Recommendations are included at the end of the results section.

PURPOSE - What was the program aiming to accomplish? To what extent did participants find that the project worked towards its purpose?

The main stated goals of the Y-Change pilot project were to:

- Improve Y-Change participants' perceptions of their own potential.
- Develop Y-Change as a youth leadership and social change model to be recommended for future delivery.
- Showcase examples of the potential of youth engagement from a practice, organisational and individual perspective.
- Provide young people with training to develop skills that allow them to gain employment and undertake advocacy and education work.

It is clear from the participants' responses that the key purpose of the Y-Change program was visible to them, and that they found the activities and processes worked to serve this purpose. They experienced a strong alignment between purpose and outcomes in relation to the ways in which the experience enhanced their self-concept, built an effective model for delivery and showcasing, and contributed towards capacity building of young people and organisations whose mission it was to serve young people.

The participants had overwhelming praise for the program and saw it as an overall positive experience:

"It's perfect – we need more of this kind of program!"

(Y-Change participant)

"Berry Street is amazing for starting Y-Change – you don't see any other similar NGOs engaging in this sort of process."

(Y-Change participant)

"I consider myself a young change-maker!"

(Y-Change participant)

Self-concept: Improving Y-Change participants' perceptions of their own potential

Interviews with the Y-Change participants highlight that how they experienced the strong fit between the program purpose and its effects on their self-concept.

"Most of those disadvantaged people don't get heard. So they can have their say but they're not really heard in a practical way. So that's what inspired me and I'm one of those people now who can make a change through Y-Change."

(Y-Change participant)

The participants agreed that the program helped them to understand that although they have been marginalised by the system they can be in positions of power and this brings a feeling of empowerment:

"I'm really thankful to this program for giving young people a voice and empowerment to believe that we are able to do something in the world."

(Y-Change participant, graduation night, June 2016)

A sense of purpose was a key factor in driving their engagement. A few of the participants found that the project enabled them to channel the passion they have for change into actions and goals. When asked what Y-Change has done well, this participant replied:

“Creating concentrated passions. We are all very interested in a lot of different topics. It’s hard to think that you can make a change without being involved in some sort of program. Rare to see that people can actually make change.”

(Y-Change participant, Reflection and Co-Creation day)

Another participant highlights the way Y-Change has allowed her to see her goals and passion for social change in the future:

“Right now I want to work with Lauren to create a training program for people who work with kids who are in care. So any sort of resi [residential housing] work where you have to work with kids I want be able to run programs for them and training to teach stuff they wouldn’t otherwise know. So that the specifics of what I want to do cos that’s the area of curiosity and the area I think is important and the area I have lots of ideas in.”

(Y-Change participant)

This participant talks about how Y-Change helped her to shift her understanding of herself and her abilities:

“Yes it’s thanks to Y-Change because before that there’s people who say you’re not mature enough to make a decision but Y-Change helped me overcome that and show that we’re mature enough to actually say what we want and make it happen.”

(Y-Change participant)

Aligning purpose and passion through contribution

The following section outlines how participants experienced the program as an innovative and authentic opportunity for youth participation, and appreciated becoming a part of the showcasing of this model.

The respondents were very confident that the Y-Change program was developing an exciting and effective model to guide the active contribution and construction of change on the part of young people. They saw a good fit between the process and purpose of the initiative, highlighting the contribution their participation was already making towards improved service efficacy and relevant policy.

“The service that we’re talking about is aimed at helping the child or person who is in crisis so speaking to those actual people would be the best way to help those people. Because other people wouldn’t have the same experience. So them talking and them being the ones who need help and who actually say “help us in this way.”

(Y-Change participant)

The participants found themselves to be active citizens with valued contributions to make. They saw their inputs recognised and valued by the organisations they presented to and believed that their contributions would benefit other young people.

“My goal is to help other people in my situation to have a better situation. I really want to make sure that something that happened to me in the system doesn’t happen to others. That’s what I think inspires me the most. Because if it happens to you, you don’t want it to happen to others.”

(Y-Change participant)

This participant highlights the importance of youth voice in enabling organisations to better understand and meet the needs of young people.

“Because they are working with them. So the things that need to be changed actually has to come from them. You might be thinking ‘this might be good for you’ or ‘this might be good for other people’ but it might actually not be good or is not that way that we want it. So speaking with us will actually make it easier. Because you’re speaking to the person you’re actually working with. So it makes sense that it should come from their point of view.”

(Y-Change participant)

This participant makes reference to the way in which Berry Street’s *Commitment to Youth Engagement*, became real, and visible, in this noting a fit between goals and process.

“So it’s good for Berry Street to say ‘ok so these people are showing me that young people and young adults can actual show others their experiences in a way that will actual cause people to do something about it’. And to say ‘ok we’re actually gonna create a program based on this’ is to take a huge leap of faith. And to be able to see that being implemented in a structural manner is very interesting.”

(Y-Change participant)

The participants were excited to see the contributions they got to make and the reactions of the staff to their contributions. Four of the young people involved in Y-Change made a presentation to Berry Street Executive staff March 2016. This opportunity to showcase the potential of youth engagement in organisations resulted in an *“exploding bubble of positivity about the program”* (Lauren Oliver). The presentation succeeded in challenging Berry Street workers to further recognise the potential of young people:

“Actually Y-Change has already made an enormous impact at Berry Street, because we, a few of us, have been trying to push for young people’s voices to be heard. But I think the reality of Y-Change and the reality of you as young people starting to speak up within the organisation has just really changed the way the organisation sees itself. And that might be hard for you to believe but you know, Lauren and I have had people who have been in the organisation for 20 years who can say, wow, I’ve been in the organisation for all this time and I have never heard from a young person in the organisation. And they say that with pride in being part of that. So it’s not just some superficial observation, people have really taken that seriously”

(Marg Hamley, Director, Berry Street Childhood Institute).

Through facilitated and informal conversations with the group and Berry Street staff, participants formed views about the necessity of their voices being heard and the potential of their participation in the sector via advocacy work.

“You can’t run a care system without the support of those you’re trying to support. I’ve had a lot of experience in this area and in residential care and in foster care most people aren’t asked their opinions and it’s suddenly it’s ‘ok you’re living here now or you’re living there now.’ And I wasn’t any different. And all of a sudden you’re told this is now what’s happening and no one’s really asked. And nothing really changes – you can say ‘I don’t agree with this policy’ and they just say ‘well it’s policy.’ It’s hard when you see people who are trying to care for people but not looking at their clients as a resource to create their care plan. And that’s something we’re doing – looking at how people can actually create lasting change and asking to be involved in these issues.”

(Y-Change participant)

Staff responses to the presentation expanded the belief that young people should be involved in the training of residential care workers, and confirmed the power of learning directly from the input of young people:

“Your presentations really made me think that we need to do more to get your voices heard by these workers – you get the messages across so much better than we do!!!”

(Sarah Waters, Senior Manager, Berry Street)

“A 10 minute talk to new employees undergoing training would be so invaluable and inspiring.”

(Stuart McLean, Senior Manager, Berry Street)

A number of participants found that the highlight for them was getting to see the impact their contribution could have on organisations. This participant talks about the impact that young people can have on organisational processes:

“...all I’ve done is tell them my experience and my family’s experience and what we’ve done. And it’s caused several people to actually confirm funding or give funding or raise awareness. And it seems minor when you’re doing it but it actually causes a huge ripple effect for what it is. Literally all you do is go speak to people. Sit there and have a conversation on a board meeting or whatever it would be and it would create actual lasting change for that organisation and it could lead to several years of actual benefits.”

(Y-Change participant)

“What brings me joy is the systemic impact of respecting the voice and experience of young people”

(Y-Change participant, Reflection and Co-Creation day)

Just being taken seriously was an uplifting and meaningful experience, and one that brought hope for change.

“Most of the staff in Shepparton have picked on my ideas and input and that’s so good that my voice has been heard.”

(Y-Change participant)

“They’re taking me seriously (the staff) and that’s the first time that that’s actually happened.”

(Y-Change participant)

Capacity building as integral to purpose

The following section outlines how participants experienced the capacity building and skill development experiences which were amongst the key purposes of the program. As argued by Lauren Oliver, Y-Change was not to be about creating a platform for young people to perform on, but rather about equipping young people to create the platform themselves. In order to enable this, the young people were provided training to develop skills to engage in advocacy work and employment.

The participants valued the ways in which the program allowed them to both develop and use these skills. They found the advocacy skills that they developed to be useful, as these skills enhanced their capacity to contribute, and to educate and advocate for people marginalised by the system they themselves had been in contact with:

“And I’ve seen how the system can work and these kids who have too but don’t have the ability to say it so I think if I have the ability I should say it. I have the experience but also the skills to tell other people.”

(Y-Change participant)

The various capacity building experiences they valued were also opportunities to make a contribution. They included a range of employment opportunities such as media interviews, speaking at board meetings, helping to choose new youth workers, developing and running class-based workshops for university courses, attendance and representation at sector forums and symposiums, informing the development of a youth-friendly research model, advising programs and services on sustainable youth engagement, speaking at conferences and helping to write training modules for new workers. One participant travelled to Shepparton Youth foyer to “input from my experiences at the Broadmeadow’s foyer and impart my wisdom to the youth development workers up there.”



Lauren Oliver (centre) and two of the Y-Change participants present at the Doing School Differently conference in September 2016

The majority of participants found the public speaking and facilitation training to be the most useful of all the training components.

“I really liked the workshop facilitation training. The way we went through everything. Yeah that’s probably what I really liked the most.”

(Y-Change participant)

“It [the training] was all useful but there were so many people with different skills so it was a good variety and we really needed all that variety cos everyone found something they needed. I don’t think you could’ve cut anything out of it. Media skills and facilitating – that’s what I’d love to do – facilitate a lot more things.”

(Y-Change participant)

The participants also believed that the skills developed in this program would benefit them in the long term including in their careers. This perception of relevance to careers was influential in having one young person decide to undertake the program:

“There were a lot of things I would gain from it on a personal and professional level that really appealed to me.... And it would allow me to use these skills to build my career.”

(Y-Change participant)

The participants valued the training not only as skill development, but also for the opportunities to do network building and to be part of a meaningful cause. The opportunity to use the skill development work both for the purpose of social change and to a personal future was a key driver of this young women’s participation:



A Y-Change participant articulating a personal campaign goal – ‘To create awareness among people who have a key role in creating a stable environment’

“I thought that it could change something which is what I wanted to do – it was a cause that I wanted to be part of. And also it was another platform for me that I’d be able to get a few skills for what I want to do in the future and get an edge on everyone else who also wants a job. So not only that I liked it but also cos like ‘yes this is gonna get me a job in the future... I wanna work in the social field – social sciences or something like that – and this opportunity would be good for that and for my resume that would help me get a job.”

(Y-Change participant)

Contribution to shaping Purpose

The staff involved understood that participation should extend to the very definition of the purpose of the program. Hence, the young people were provided the opportunity to shape the purpose of their participation in the program. From the outset, young participants identified as change makers and showed their enthusiasm to become advocates and to ‘give back’. During the orientation camp, young people were asked to consider what they, as young people who have experienced disadvantage, can offer to people. Their responses indicate the interconnected nature of positive self-concept and social contribution, pointing to the importance of using a youth participation model in which young people were not only positioned as key informants, but also as change-makers.

We want people to know:

- There is something of value in our experiences
- That we have something to offer
- That they can learn from us
- That we have really varied experiences – we’re not all the same
- We are valuable
- We are making change happen
- We care about communities and about people
- We want to improve the system/make a difference
- We want to give back
- We are using opportunities to do all this and keep growing

Group work output from Y-Change participants, January 2016

PROCESS - What methods were used to structure & enable participation?

Attention in this domain calls for programmers to think broadly about methodology and processes. Participatory processes are relational in nature. They bring people together to engage in reciprocal and collective interaction. They are dialogic, rather than didactic, and involve high levels of participant-to-participant interaction.

The Y-Change participants were invited to participate in a range of project activities and a number of processes were used to build relationships and structure interaction. These included:

- The camp
- Training workshops
- Reflection and Co-Creation days

The Camp

Important to *Process* is social comfort and sensitivity. It is crucial in projects such as this that methods are used that help participants to develop the confidence and courage to engage with others, to speak about sensitive topics such as experiences of disadvantage, and to generate critical and creative thought.

A camp was held at the beginning of the program and took place over three days, with an introductory session at the Berry Street Richmond office and then traveling to Lady Northcote YMCA near Bacchus March Victoria. Numerous participants spoke about the anxiety of new things and people, and the reluctance or nervousness they felt in attending. However, throughout the interviews it was clear that the camp was a strength of the program and contributed greatly to the success of the Y-Change program in 2016.



Team building activities on the camp

The introductory session engaged the group in some ice-breaker and get-to-know-you activities. The participants reported that the most important activity was a code setting discussion. In this discussion, the group was asked to provide input to a code or set of values that would guide the culture of Y-change across the year. They were asked to complete the sentences 'in this group we...', 'in the group we do not...', and 'if these guidelines are not upheld we...'. In considering their input they were asked to think about what they needed from the group, from Lauren as the coordinator and from the environments in which they met in order for them to feel safe and able to contribute to Y-Change discussions and work.

The setting of the code established a set of expectations that were subsequently role-modelled by Damian and Crystal as peer-mentors during the three-day camp. The code developed on the camp follows.

In this group we...

- Feel Comfortable & included
- Listen & Understand others- opinions, values & culture
- Empathy/transparency
- Understanding boundaries/ respectful & open
- Patience/Different types of communication
- Genuine check ins with one another
- Stopping & ensuring everyone has been able to contribute
- Respect physical space
- Respect/value different views/ideas
- Be inclusive
- Forgiving attitudes- Non Judgemental
- Don't take everything to heart/face value
- Encourage one another
- Maturity
- Confidentiality, being safe to share stories

In this group we don't...

- Discriminate
- Gossip
- Gang up
- Disrespect
- Don't get stuck in our preconceived judgements
- Don't pressure
- Don't belittle/condescend

If these things aren't happening we will....

- Talk about it 1:1 or as a group
- Talk to mentors
- Address in a way you are comfortable with (write it down)
- Workshop as a group

The participants strongly felt that the camp was crucial for relationship building and friendship forming, and was attributed with helping to form the basis of trust and respect that was valued by participants throughout the program.

"It's [Y-Change] very much based on trust and respect and those things when they were implemented at the beginning are vital. If we all didn't create those grounds for supporting one another we wouldn't be what we are today. So I'd say that doing that in the early stages was really good."

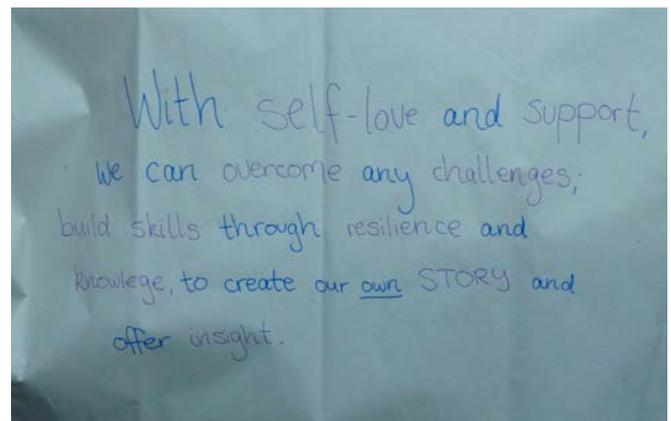
(Y-Change participant)

The training and the camp assisted in developing close, supportive relationships:

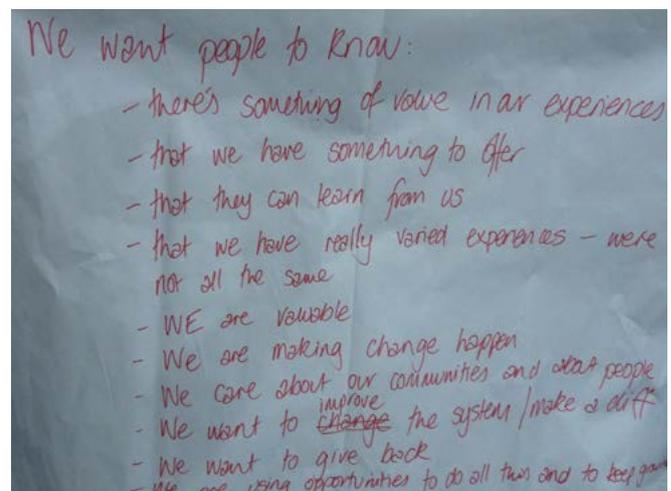
"We went on camp together and built a rapport with one another and that really really helped. So I've only worked at Berry Street twice so far but one of those times required us to work with our colleagues so that was really really helpful cos we understood each other and we were comfortable in each other's presence."

(Y-Change participant)

One of the final activities on the camp was the development of statements that defined how the Y-Changes want people to understand them – an antidote to the 'disadvantaged' label.



A guiding statement developed by the Y-Change participants on the camp



A list of things Y-change participants want people to know about them – an 'antidote' to the label 'disadvantaged'

Developing Y-Change strengths posters

Amongst the processes that the participants valued were those that featured a strengths-based approach. For example, during the camp, the participants developed a 'soul profile'. The activity began with participants describing: 'What their purpose in life is'; 'What they can be counted on for'; and 'What their contribution is to the world'. These answers were placed on a poster along with a drawing of the participant. The next activity involved considering the qualities they admire in their heroes and in leaders that they respect. The young people selected some of these attributes as attributes they aspire to for themselves and added these to their poster. Finally all the participants, peer mentors and Lauren were encouraged to add to each other's posters any qualities they noted in each other. This activity was valued as a strength based approach by group which noted they were more typically defined by their vulnerabilities and needs than by their strengths.

Training

The training was made up of a number of workshops on media, public speaking and workshop facilitation. The training was all workshop based with a combination of theory, discussion and activities. The Y-Change participants were asked to take turns delivering and running their own ice-breaker and warm up activities. The training received positive feedback from all participants:

"I can't imagine it going any better than what it has. It has worked out perfectly.... It's a very simple and straightforward method that doesn't make people feel locked in or obligated."

(Y-Change participant)



An example of the posters the Y-Change participants developed. The poster includes notes about what they see as their purpose in life, what they can be counted on for, their contribution to the world and attributes they aspire to. Other participants added positive qualities they see in the participants to the posters

"I really liked the workshop facilitation training. The way we went through everything. Yeah that's probably what I really liked the most."

(Y-Change participant)

"It was all useful (the training) but there were so many people with different skills so it was a good variety and we really needed all that variety cos everyone found something they needed. I don't think you could've cut anything out of it."

(Y-Change participant)

"Media training was good and I found it very useful"

(Y-Change participant)

The training provided the participants the opportunity to participate in conversations they might not have been able to participate in without it.

"I would have never been able to do that without Y-Change. There are some skills I have gained like public speaking. Like I couldn't have walked out of resi [residential care] and said this even though I wanted to. That's why I love the opportunities Y-Change have given us. Not only do I get the opportunity to say stuff but I also have so much better skills to be able to say it, so much better than when I started off here. I knew what I wanted to say but at the same time, I still got a bit lost. I've been able to work out what I want to say through Y-Change."

(Y-Change participant)

The training assisted in giving the participants' confidence and equipping them with skills that would enable them to participate in the employment. When asked if the training was useful, this participant replied:

"Yes it makes me feel confident and actually getting more skills makes me say 'oh I can actually handle that'. Like public speaking - I used to not be able to be a good public speaker. But I think from then and now I can see a big difference."

(Y-Change participant)



Y-Change participants undertaking training

Collective and respectful relationships

Through the interviews, all the Y-Changers stressed the importance of strong and respectful relationships as a core component of the program. Throughout the program participatory methods were used to build trust and stable relationships. From the beginning formal and informal conversations were facilitated by the peer mentors and Lauren about difference, and how to respect each other's different opinions. This was a theme that arose in all the interviews:

"It's definitely a good support system, it's definitely a good friendship group. And it also helps to develop different viewpoints and discussions of different viewpoints"

(Y-Change participant)

"There is now great friendship which has been really interesting to watch develop and there is also great optimism... you all pull each other forward with that optimism. There's a profound level of trust in the group. There's a huge level of mutual respect and ... there's a real celebration of difference and a comfort in the shared understanding that everyone has of where people have come from and what's important to them"

(Lauren Oliver, Berry Street staff and Y-Change co-creator, graduation night).

The camp had enabled them to feel comfortable with each other and supported by one another which made training easier. When asked about the best thing about the program one responded:

"The connection that we all have. I think that has been pretty special."

Because of the support participant felt they were able to make the commitment of early starts, long travel and meeting the Y-Change group on a Saturday. Participants felt the peer mentors also provided this support and added to the environment of respect. Participants spoke highly of all the facilitators and trainers, especially in terms of being valued and respected. It was important that the trainings were a safe space that young people could explore and develop skills.

Participants reported that they gained a strong sense of community as they became part of a social network and met people with similar interests. The young people came to position themselves and understand themselves as a collective rather than just as individuals. This provided them an important sense of empowerment and agency.

"Collectively we are better"

(Data produced from a Reflection and Co-Creation Day)

POSITIONING - How were the young people positioned, and what forms of participation were made available to the young people as a result of this positioning?

This domain draws attention to the concept of positioning and asks programmers to consider the various ways in which the young people will be positioned within the project [30]. It invites programmers to consider the various ways in which young people will be positioned within the program.

Positioning was a key consideration in the planning and implementation of the Y-Change project. It was discussed by the Berry Street staff and Y-changers throughout the process in a number of different ways. This section explores the ways the young people were invited to contribute to the project, and the way the concept of positioning was employed by the Berry Street staff to implement the project.

The project presumed that it should not simply create a platform for young people to perform on, but rather, equip young people to create the platform themselves. Thus the project set out to position the participants as co-creators rather than just as recipients.

Young people positioned as contributors

Young people are often restricted from full participation in their communities because they are considered not yet ready to be social actors. Because of this, they are often excluded from decision making processes. These young people valued the ways in which they were positioned as active contributors and partners throughout the entire project, including the process of shaping the project through their contributions and conversations during the Reflection and Co-Creation days.

“In the co-reflection days we were defining our own purpose.”
(Y-Change participant)

Asked about the way Y-Change staff treated participants, one participant pointed to the experience of partnership:

“In a lot of other programs they treat you as kids. This one they don’t. If you do any other sort of program they are like... we’re going to feed you and then you go away. With this it was about let’s see what happens together.”
(Y-Change participant)

This comment highlights past experiences of being positioned as passive recipients of youth participation programs via the routines of being given food and information and sent away without being allowed to contribute meaningfully in the project. Another participant highlights the contrast between the way they are positioned in the Y-Change program, as opposed to what happens in other programs:

“It’s not condescending. It’s not like – we’re getting a whole bunch of youths together and ticking some boxes which is what a lot of youth participation seems to be. People aren’t talking down to you like they do in a lot of programs. You’re seen as experts. It’s the way all youth should be looked at but they’re not – they’re seen as less.”
(Y-Change participant)

As discussed that Y-Change was developed in collaboration with three young people – Crystal, Damian and Lily. One of the co-creators highlights the need for both capacity and a platform to make change:

“I was very fortunate that there were people around me who recognised my capacity and also I had the right environment around me to become motivated and to see possibilities.”
(Y-Change peer mentor)

Young people positioned as experts on their own experiences

The Y-Change programmers were aware of the stigmatising and limiting effect that labels such as “in care” “addict” or “homeless” can have in relation to the ways in which young people are positioned – leading them to be understood as either in need of protection, or as a risk to themselves or to others. Labels can also be internalised and lead to self-stigmatising. The program has sought to shift away from these labels by positioning the participants in relation to their expertise and capacity to contribute through the knowledge gained from their own experience.

While systematic advocacy and change is the main driving goal of the project, Y-Change is also about individual transformation and empowerment. The project encourages and facilitates a process for young people to shift their self-identification from limiting labels to leader, advocate and change-maker. In this sense, the program has worked to empower young people through positioning them as experts.

While calling young people experts isn’t new in the youth participation discourse, the explicit positioning of young people as experts who can teach from their experience provides something new for the organisation.

“I certainly feel like particularly for the sector that we operate in talking about young people, people have talked about young people as experts before, but using that language consistently, and using that language with the young people, talking to them as if they are experts, asking them for their expertise, talking them about their knowledge base in terms of their experiences, and framing that in the context of saying that’s your expertise – your expertise is in what it’s like to navigate the homelessness system, what it’s like to navigate resi [residential] care... Talking to them about that, I think that is quite innovative because I don’t think young people are generally spoken to as if they are experts. I think the phrase ‘experts of their own experience’ has been used a lot in youth work, in youth welfare and child and family welfare, but it’s generally about adults saying oh ‘we should talk to them, they’re the experts’ but never sharing that, never saying to the young people ‘you’re the experts here, help us develop this’, it’s a power handover that freaks people out I think.”
(Lauren Oliver, Berry Street staff and Y-Change co-creator)

This notion of ‘expertise’ opened up new conversations and understandings for the young people and added to their confidence and belief in their abilities. The power of this re-positioning cannot be underestimated. The following quotes are from the participants on being called an expert:

“Makes you feel empowered, like someone wants to listen to you. But also it makes you realise that... it adds values to our words. And it makes you realise that those words are professional. Like we know those words are going to mean something important.”

(Y-Change participant)

“If I’m an expert – I’m going to talk about my expertise. And then anything I’m saying and taking seriously is my expertise. So it actually makes you think ‘shit I know something!’ Cos all your life you’re told ‘that doesn’t count, that doesn’t mean anything – move on from that’. Well guess what? People do want to hear me talk about it. I am able to use that to be empowered to be able to say things that are gonna make a difference.”

(Y-Change participant)

“It creates a level of respect between Lauren and I or Lauren and the rest of us. I feel like that really is the truth. It creates respect between us and the people who work to create programs like Damian, Crystal and Lily. And everyone else that’s come in – that was a part of it.”

(Y-Change participant)

“We definitely feel that our experiences have power within this area that we’re going in to but none of us feel comfortable with being called that but that’s just cos it’s a big term to use on someone. However, Lauren saying that has helped to bolster our confidences and the team has said it makes us feel like ‘yeah I’m in control of this and I’m in charge of this. I’m an expert in this’. And that’s really empowering. I can’t take the term and run with it cause not all of us have the confidences to do that... [however] her use of the term has definitely helped to support us in believing that that’s the term that we should use.”

(Y-Change participant)

There was also hesitation around using the term ‘expert’, partly due to an awareness that, while the title ‘expert’ provides confidence for themselves, the obstacle of how others see them remains:

“It depends on person to person and you can’t obviously make every single person who’s been working at Berry Street who’s been working there for 20 or 30 years (you know the type of person I mean), see that a young person or a child in their eyes is an expert.... I’d definitely question if other people would view us as an expert. I feel like some people will. And yes we are an expert of our own situations. We do know our own situations relatively well compared to most people who would approach us about it. I know how to cope in kinship care. But the term itself - I like it. I think everyone in Y-Change and our group so far has been ok with it but I worry that in the future people won’t take it so seriously.”

(Y-Change participant)

The value of being positioned as a ‘worker’

The young people appreciated the forms of recognition that they were given as ‘workers’. A number of practical measures worked to strengthen this identity as respected worker, including payment for services employment, business cards, and Berry Street staff referring to the participants as workers or team members.

“My first paid gig with Berry St was ResiRocks and that was really nerve wracking. Because I’ve always wanted to talk to people and try to get them to hear my experiences and turn them into a little lesson or whatever and give them to people so that people understand how not to fuck with kids – how to not screw them up in care cos I’ve seen it happen. So I want them to know that. So I feel like my whole like is “Listen to me! Like seriously guys!” So with Y-Change I thought finally! And so I got up and I was being paid! So instead of me asking people for their time they were asking me for my time – I was being paid to stand up there and share my expertise. And that’s super empowering and makes you feel super good.”

(Y-Change participant)

Paying young people for their expertise demonstrates both an actual and a notional value for what they bring to the table. This is important for the young people who come to understand that they have something to offer that is needed and valued by others. A shift from seeing themselves as a recipient of services and benevolence to being a valuable source of information and skills can have a profound effect on perceptions of identity, self-worth and potential.

“We got employed! And you’ve got no idea! Lauren said this is the first time anything like this has ever happened. And the feeling of being able to say that I used be part of Berry Street and I’m actually part of it! And I know it’s only casual and it’s nothing major but it is major! I think that really made a difference – being able to be valued as an employee now. That’s like a crazy thing that I think every kid deserves to feel. So that’s a great opportunity. It would’ve been great if I had’ve done this for free, as part of just some program. But the fact that I can now say I’m employed – that makes me feel like a professional and I think a lot of people need to feel that. They’re 20 or whatever and they’ve come from services and now they have a legitimate job – that’s pretty cool.”

(Y-Change participant)

It is also important to note that youth participation programs often demand of a lot young people’s times and that payment also provides an incentive to giving up time

“I feel like [the payment] makes a more formalised aspect to it. I feel that it does help people with the incentive of going out to a job and such especially when it comes to being a broke student. It’s nice too and it does help.”

(Y-Change participant)

Alongside, the benefits and uniqueness of the paid employment business cards supported the young people’s employment status and gave them a greater feeling of being a “professional” or “expert” when they were able to hand them out to other workers in the field (eg. at conferences). A participant who handed out a business card at a seminar found “it was very uplifting.”

The explicit discussion of the ways the young people are labelled allowed new possibilities for understanding their identities:

“No-one here has to be what they’re were born from and who you were perceived to be since the day you were born, since the day you entered the system... I think that that is really inspiring and amazing.”

(Y-Change participant)

Young people and positioning as informant, rather than as inspiration

One of the challenges the young people experienced in relation to being thought of as experts in the sector was a constant positioning by others as “inspirational” or as the young people themselves termed it – as “inspiration porn”. A question that arose from the Y-Change on the Reflection and Co-Creation day was:

“How can life experience be positioned as expertise and not inspiration porn?”

There was a distinct awareness from the participants that constantly being invited to re-tell troubled parts of their stories frames them as “victim/heroes” and distracts attention from the structural conditions and challenges that they have dealt with and wish to comment on.

“They’ll take our story as inspiration but they won’t acknowledge what made us an inspiration in the first place. What the challenges were that we faced. They’re not really acknowledging it – they’re just focus on the outcome.”

(Y-Change participant)

One of the participants did feel that the young people themselves were the solution to interrupting this type of positioning:

“And you’ll go and speak and they’ll say ‘Oh the young person spoke and she was so amazing!’ But it’s not like they’ll sit down and say ‘ok this is what you told us, now what can we do to change it?’ So it’s quite frustrating... but I think having a group like Y-Change around is going to slowly change the way that people perceive young people. I think over time we’re definitely chipping away at people’s thought processes.”

(Y-Change participant)

The investment of financial resources in the expertise of young people who have experienced disadvantage could be seen as a bottom line incentive for organisations and professionals to actively embrace their input and influence where previously (as noted above) policy and intention have not translated into on-the-ground practice. However further work could be done to ensure that young advocates are not only harnessed to re-tell stories of their suffering, but also to work as key informants on the strengths and weaknesses of the system and its services, and to share their insights about what can or should be changed to improve outcomes for others.

Young people positioned as educators

The positioning as ‘experts’ on one’s own experience led naturally to the sharing of expertise as a form of education. When the young people presented ideas to the Berry Street staff, a shift occurred in relation to understanding the ways in which young people could contribute as educators of adults. This was evidence in the responses collected from Berry Street workers in which they noted this contribution:

“I felt somewhat ashamed that we never before recognised the fantastic insight and perception that many of our young service users have and that we seemed to assume that we hold all the knowledge, expertise and answers. Obviously not true.”

(Stuart McLean, Senior Manager Berry Street).

Others pointed to the power and authenticity of hearing advice directly from the young people’s:

“...researchers academics, policy wonks like me could say the same things (and often do) but it has far less impact – the messenger is as important as the message – when the messenger is the person who has been in Out of Home Care it is much more powerful”

(Julian Pocock, Berry Street).

The experience of learning from the young people prompted realisations about the potential for more widespread contribution in relation to the training of residential care workers:

“This should happen at various forums every 3 months... to keep people really in touch with the importance of the basics and to take the inspiration from the presenters”

(Pauline Wright, Berry Street Senior Manager).

PROTECTION - What methods were used to provide support, & ensure access & safety?

The Y-Change project aimed to ensure that participation experiences would be safe for participants – both physically and emotionally. Participants reported that they felt supported in all interactions and knew that Lauren Oliver was a person they could approach with problems or questions. Additionally the participants appreciated that they were trained about self-care and boundaries. As such they were able to cite numerous times they put appropriate boundaries in place in order to ensure their emotional safety.

“All that was required of me was to talk about my experiences. And I remember Lauren telling me to draw boundaries before I talk and that’s something I found really helpful. Yeah so knowing not to overshare and restricting a few things.”

(Y-Change participant)

Lauren worked on trying to return ownership of each young person’s story to them and support young people to reclaim their stories. Young people who have experienced the systems of support and care often have to retell their story numerous times and it was felt by Lauren that they start to effectively lose possession of it and it just becomes a tool or a thing they hand to workers or professionals. Lauren facilitated discussions

about this with the young people and it was agreed that they should be the sole owners of their story and they should make informed choices about how, when and why they use it. The group looked at what happens to your story after it leaves your hands and who might hear it, manipulate it or misinterpret it. Lauren also made clear to the group that she was not their case worker or social worker, but their facilitator, and, at the employment stage of the project, their manager. In positioning herself in this way, Lauren made it clear that she did not need to know their stories and they were in control of sharing the aspects they decided were relevant to their work.

This training in boundary-setting helped the young people develop manage intrusive questions encountered within their advocacy work:

"I was doing some media about the project and they asked a question pertaining to my particular experience of like why I went into out of home care. And I didn't want to answer that and what they training taught me was to just generalise it and to divert the question. And that really helped in that instance."

(Y-Change participant)

One of the criteria to participate in the Y-Change project is that the young person must not be currently in a state of entrenched disadvantage. They need to be a young person who has come out of disadvantage and is able to reflect on it. This was an ethical decision made by the Lauren to protect the participants and not overburden those in chronic disadvantage (where their chaotic lives might not have space for program such as this). This choice was agreed upon by the participants:

"Every person employed in the Y-Change program can say 'I'm not comfortable with telling every aspect of my life but I can say this is how this is and this is how that is and I can speak from my experience without revealing too much of myself.' If you can't speak about the issues without some excessive anxiety or excessive trauma then I don't feel it's safe for people. So it has to be at a point where they feel safe enough or don't feel obligated if they do feel unsafe."

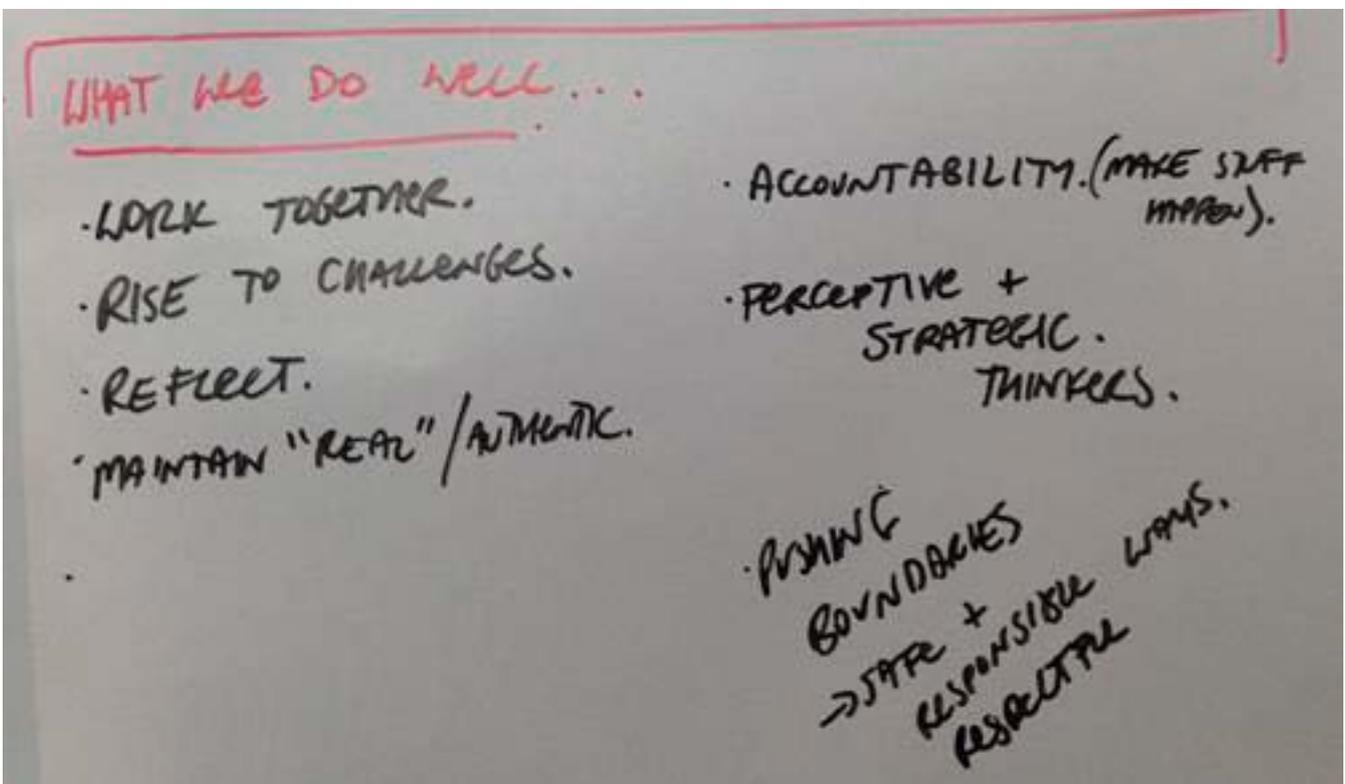
(Y-Change participant)

Safety and self-care was a key theme in the Reflection and Co-Creation days demonstrating the emphasis on this in the training. Y-Changers agreed that they are constantly trying to push boundaries but also questioning and reflecting how these boundaries can be pushed in safe, responsible and respectful ways.

In a Reflection and Co-Creation day participants developed a question together around the topic of protection:

"How to stop protective being paternalistic?"

This question is pertinent for all youth participation projects and something that the Y-Change project will no doubt continue to negotiate and conversations with participants about the difference uses of language such as 'protection' and 'being safe' need to continue as has happened in this pilot.



What we do well? Output from a Reflection and Co-Creation day

PERSPECTIVES - Whose views were considered?

There is increasing recognition that young people who have experienced and exited the service system have necessarily acquired certain skills and knowledge through their experiences that will bring a new perspective. In this sense, it is important to explore the potential for young people to contribute their views as experts and consultants once they have left the support system. There is value in asking young people who have recently left care to reflect on their experiences and feed into improving the system for the next generation of children and young people in care. For the Y-Change project, choices of whose perspectives are included are linked to their work around protection and choices made about the safety of participants.

“Most of the programs I work with... they don't work specifically with disadvantaged people so they don't have the same experiences. And I respect their point of view but they don't have the same experiences. But working with Y-Change they have that kind of mutual understanding so that's why it's so important to have a program like Y-Change.... By mutual understanding I mean you share the same experiences as the others. Even if you can't understand one bit you can understand other bits because you were there once.”

(Y-Change participant)

The Y-Change group came from a diverse range of backgrounds and participants saw this diversity as a strength.

“We all come from different experiences and backgrounds but we can always be reliant on each other in a way. For instance I'm from a homelessness background and youth crime related stuff - you know pretty broad but people draw on me to give input from that part of my background and I can do the same. I'm not that well versed in out of home care or foster care or things like that. So the fact that we can draw on everyone's experiences - that's what's really good about it.”

(Y-Change participant)

Young people's views were paramount in training. Their conversations and ideas were encouraged and the participants found that the facilitators did not direct or lead the conversation, but rather were responsive when productive conversations were occurring:

“So Lauren actually let it build and say that's an interesting notion where do you want to go with that. Rather than saying 'no that's not what we're talking about' like some people would. So instead of it being led by her or whoever was facilitating it was very much lead by us.”

(Y-Change participant)

POWER RELATIONS - How were relationships managed to ensure equity, respect & positive regard between all parties?

The processes that a program uses to elicit and manage participation will influence the power relations that evolve between programmers and participants, and between the participants themselves.

The young people valued the ways in which the Y-Change program used transparent, and authentic feedback mechanisms, and noted that this was key in addressing the impacts of inherently unequal power relations between adults and young people. They found that the transparency and honesty from the Berry Street staff contributed to a feeling of respect.

“Lauren had the upmost respect for us. And anyone we came across in training had the upmost respect for us and you don't find that in a lot of services. There's always a hierarchy and you always know you're place and it's below them and if you challenge them you're labelled as against authority. The other services would never talk about you to you the way that Y-Change did. Because they [Y-Change] were so open and transparent. Like this is what we're doing, this is what we want you to take from us. It wasn't like 'oh they're below us and we need to use them so let's play mind games with them to get what we need'. Yeah there was a lot of respect.”

(Y-Change participant)

“From my experiences with services and their participation youth participation is just kids giving adults what they want. Like them talking about stuff and adults saying 'good good we can tick that box'. And I walked into Y-Change a bit funny cos I thought that's what it would've been - We'll have a few sessions, you talk about your experiences, we write it all down and then WE [Berry Street] turn it into a document where we can say 'look how amazing our work is'. But it's been completely different so I think youth engagement is about not just 'engaging'. Not just saying 'yes I turned up to the meeting and said these things' cos I can do that anytime. I do do that all the time cos all the services I've been with and I'm still with make me do surveys, make me show up to my case management and say stuff. And that's fine I want to do it but at the same time you can't literally say to me - that's youth engagement cos it's not. I have no say in it. Just cos I'm there and I'm saying something, doesn't mean I have a say in it. Whereas I really feel Y-Change is about getting your voice heard and that's what youth engagement is about. It's about you being able to make a change. You know here we developed something together.”

(Y-Change participant)

Youth participation programs including this one will inherently involve unequal power relationships between adults and youth. However the participants felt that power was placed in their hands where possible. This next quote highlights that although there was a broader structure and goal, participants were given agency to choose the direction. The staff's honesty and commitment to transparency meant the participants knew what the end goal was and not under the illusion of having more power than they actual did.

“For me I feel like we're a lot more hands on than the others I've done in the past. Lauren is in charge but she lets us go about things in our own kind of way. So she'll have an idea and say this is kind of what I want but we can do whatever way as long as we get somewhere. Whereas for the other ones they've been like this is what I want and this is how I want it done and we can't stray outside of these lines.”

(Y-Change participant)

Many participants felt that they gained a better understanding of the system as a result of their participation, and cited this as unusual in participation programs:

“The frustration I have with many youth participation projects is they take all the information but what you get in return is virtually nothing. You might get a nice voucher but that’s not going to help you understand the issues better and that’s not going help you see what your work has done.... It’s rampant. It’s disempowering.”

(Y-Change participant)

Power relations were explicitly discussed within the training, Reflection and Co-Creation days as well as within ongoing conversations. This helped to teach the young people about the system that lead to their marginalisation and disempowerment. At the July co-creation day the participants developed a list of “wishes” together. One of the wishes was “we wish we could understand more about the way systems work and the processes that help change them”. While these conversations had already begun, Lauren worked hard to ensure an understanding and analysis of the system continued throughout. The group began with exploratory discussions around the support system for children and young people, and workers from the Berry Street organisation were asked to join the conversation and share their understanding of how the system and structures work. For example, the out of home care system was in the process of reform, and this provided the opportunity for discussions about how that has been structured, how it was developed and how decisions are made within this system. Conversations also included constructions of young people in policy and the media.

Furthermore, the young people did not feel that they were promised more than could be delivered by the project. They were aware that they were not going to be regarded as equals by many professionals due to their lack of employment experiences but did want to be considered to be experts that the professionals should listen to in regards to life experiences. As can be noted in this statement, the participants valued working together, and the experience of partnership was one in which the power relations were attuned to a collective and respectful sharing and a conjoint contribution.

Feedback processes were built in into the project such as Reflection and Co-Creation days. This independent evaluation also acts as a form of accountability for the project. Participants were given anonymity in the evaluation interviews and were aware their opinions and experiences would be the main component of this evaluation to strengthen the program and provide critique.



One of the participants analysing campaign ideas

Improvements to the program

As is clearly highlighted throughout this report, Y-Change participants valued and enjoyed participating in the project and felt that it educated, enriched and empowered them to make a difference. They were also able to provide suggestions about ways to improve the program. These suggestions included the desire for portfolios, the need for additional facilitation training, the timing of the camp, and the location used for workshops.

Portfolios for knowledge retention

Participants recommended that a system be devised to help with knowledge retention. This was related to their need to retain and revisit the inputs and training they were provided with. They felt a need for documentation, and suggested the development of a portfolio or repository for all their rich experiences. They felt that this would help participants when they wanted to return to the inputs at a later date.

“To have a solid copy of it throughout the entire thing or to have a physical copy of what was there would’ve been helpful. I was taking notes throughout the entire thing but my notes are very scattered cos I’m not very organised but to have that would’ve been very helpful. Even just a folder or something where we can comply everything we’ve done. Even half a page or a page or just basic things you’d wanna do if you were on a job or wanted to create a campaign. So like, ok I’m doing a public speaking job in two days ‘oh crap what do I do?’ So it would’ve been good to have a one page document on each area of the training.”

(Y-Change participant)

Booster trainings for reconnection and growth

Other suggestions related to the desire to continue to work on the development of public speaking, facilitation and training skills. The participants recommended providing booster trainings as a way to grow these skills and to reconnect people after time had passed.

“I was thinking about how I would get more training and I’d love to do booster training in facilitating cos I feel that that’s quite an advanced skill set that requires a lot of knowledge. But this is just coming from me personally. Cos 12 weeks isn’t a long time – not that I want it to go longer but I’d love the opportunity to do deeper stuff.”

(Y-Change participant)

“For me personally I would’ve liked to do more workshop facilitation training – learning more about ways to ask questions”

(Y-Change participant)

Another participant asked for training that would help with interpersonal speaking skills but acknowledge the difficulty of teaching this:

“Maybe a little more training on the speaking skills in general. So you’re talking to a lot of corporate people that are very high up – literally trained professionals in their field and they know exactly how to say what they want to say. And then it’s us and we’re just like kids. I don’t know how you’d incorporate that into training but you speak to so many higher up people but yeah I don’t know how’d you develop it.”

(Y-Change participant)

Accessibility of timing and location

A number of participants mentioned the possibility of improving the accessibility of the location of the training and the times at which it took place. Not everyone found a Saturday morning a good time, but whilst some participants felt that while Saturday mornings were inconvenient, they enjoyed the program so much that the time would not be a barrier.

“I think it’s perfect apart from location! The location is a bit far for everyone. I’m not just speaking for myself.”

(Y-Change participant)

Easing the social entry point

Whilst the camp was critical to helping develop supportive relationships between the participants and was greatly valued by the participants, it was also seen by some as a “terrifying” prospect that brought about a considerable feeling of anxiety in some participants. Coming early in the relationships meant that it was even more of a social challenge than if it had been timed later in their program. They felt that a big experience such as this would be better timed later in the program.

“I feel that only thing that might have possibly improved it would have been a meet and greet before going on camp cos that camp was terrifying.... It would weed out anyone who wasn’t confident but then that could be a bad thing. Not everyone in Y-Change is extremely confident but they’re all more confident than most people I’ve ever met. Everyone there has made the leap to go ‘ok I’m gonna be part of this thing that’s never been done before and go on a camp’ and it’s completely unprecedented in all the organisations that they’ve been a part of. It’s a big leap to trust people and I feel a meet and greet before that might help but might not.”

(Y-Change participant)

Further work and research arising from this the Y-Change project

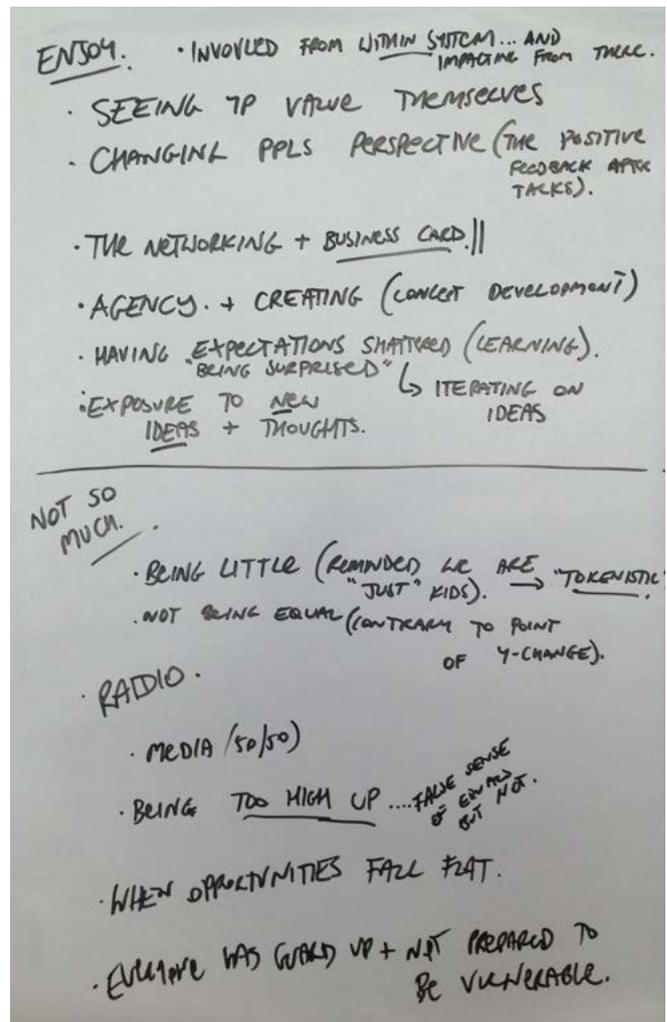
This evaluation of the Y-Change pilot has explored the effects the program has had on the young people themselves, and to a small extent on some of the staff who interacted with them. The young people who have participated in Y-Change felt that they had been empowered as change-makers, however it was beyond the scope of this study to fully explore how the staff who came in contact with them were influenced in relation to the views they hold about young people and their capacity to contribute.

The Y-Changers valued being recognised as contributors with an expertise to share. There is further work to be done to explore the impact the Y-Change participants have had on Berry Street. Importantly, the pilot has raised the question for Berry Street about how to firmly embed participation within organisational cultures and structures, and how to offer genuine and well planned participation to young people and children that is not an add-on but rather is an integral part of the way that the organisation and staff relate to children.

Further work could explore how participation and Y-Change can enhance Berry Street and inform the ways the organisation positions young people. One of the Berry Street staff who heard a presentation by the young people pointed to the challenge of taking advice into action.

“What I took away from it was how much of it we already knew, and how horrible we are as a group at articulating it, and being able to make the changes that we all pretty much agree on”

(Senior Manager Berry Street staff).



What have we enjoyed? What have we not enjoyed?

Conclusion

The Y-Change program put participants to work as contributors and workers, involving them in consultations and decision-making processes to drive service development and improvement. It provided them with the learning experiences, peer support and mentoring that they needed to contribute as workers. It is an example of a youth-serving organisation making efforts to enhance its accountability, effectiveness and ethics by providing opportunities for those they serve to have a say in shaping services.

Evaluation of this pilot project has demonstrated the benefits of providing young people a platform for contribution, whilst concurrently helping them to develop the skills needed to perform upon this platform. Cahill's model for planning child and youth participation (2016) proved useful in analysing the Y-Change program. It provided a framework within which to identify the overall coherence and effectiveness of the program, and the way in which consideration of purpose, process, positioning, perspectives, protection and power relations led to development of a meaningful, inclusive, effective and ethical program.

The evaluation found that the young people wanted to be change makers. They felt empowered by being positioned as advocates, and educators, with expertise to share. Their engagement in change work had a profound effect on their feelings of agency and wellbeing.

The Y-Change model of youth participation, and its focus on employing young people as expert consultants, serves as a promising model for other youth serving organisations.

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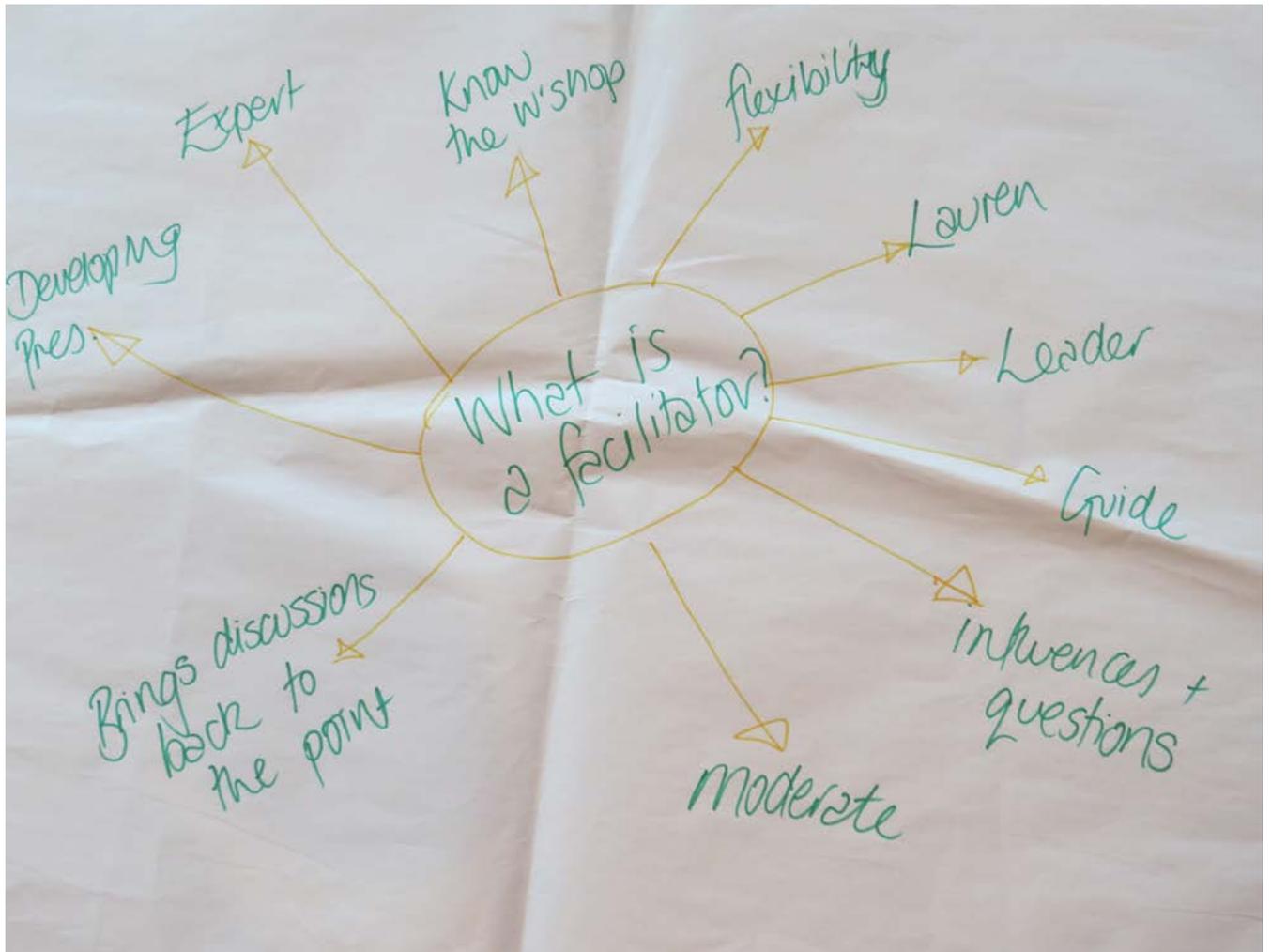
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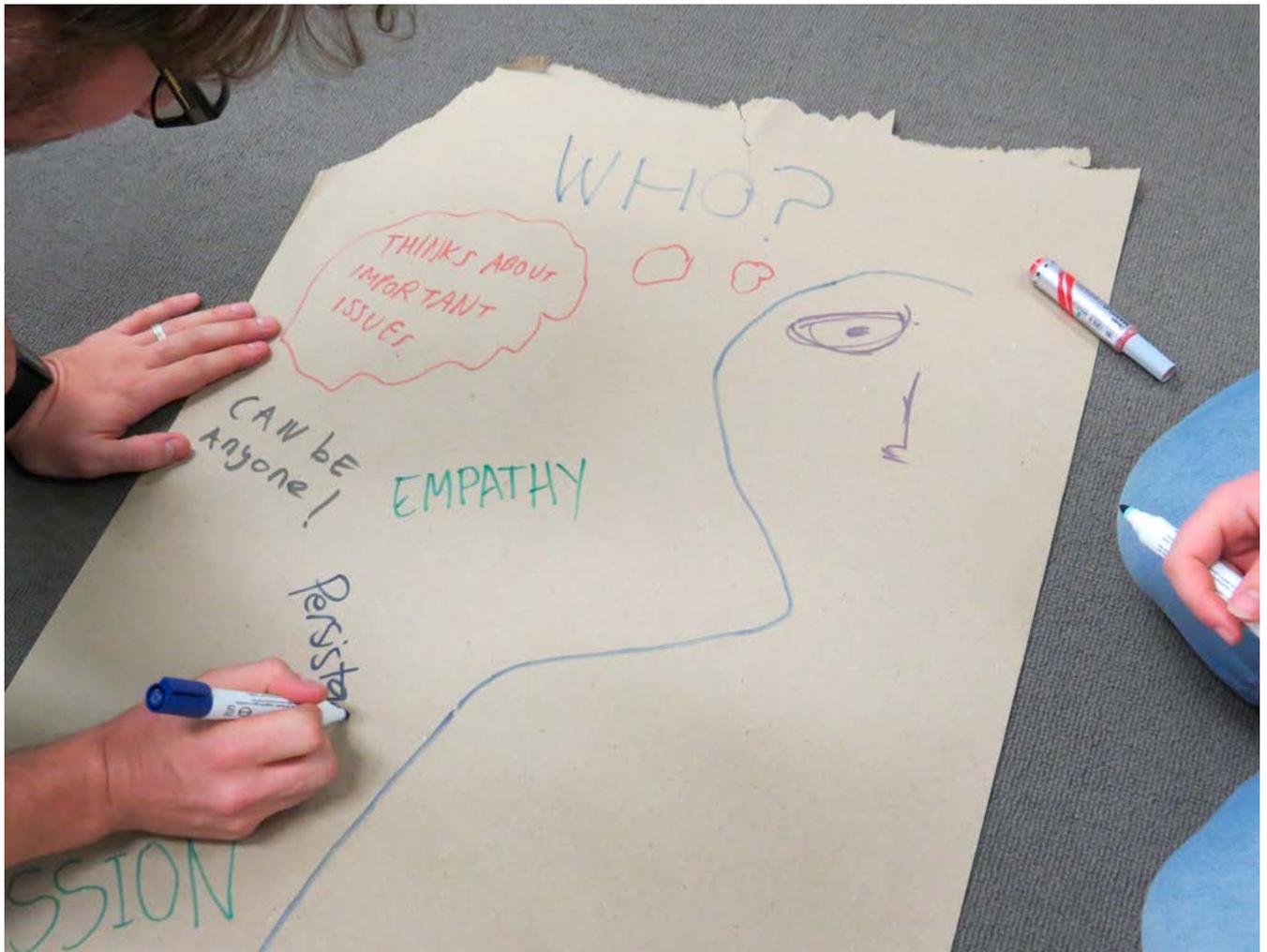
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We want people to know:

- there's something of value in our experiences
- that we have something to offer
- that they can learn from us
- that we have really varied experiences - were not all the same
- WE are valuable
- We are making change happen
- We care about our communities and about people
- We want to ~~change~~^{improve} the system / make a diff
- We want to give back
- we are using opportunities to do all this and to keep growing







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