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WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

What is Youth Voice and Youth Participation?

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WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

Abstract

Jóvenes SANOS is a youth program, under United Way of Santa Cruz County, located in Watsonville, California. Under Jóvenes SANOS (JS), a guidebook was created to address what youth voice and youth participation are. In JS, youth participation is minimal. The contributing factors include the development stage of the program, the partnership between adults and youth, and the misconception that youth are not interested in social change. To tackle this issue, it is important to recruit adults who will listen to youth because it can lead to an increase in youth productivity, instead of having them participate in a passive way. In addition, the program can not grow as a whole if youth are not being involved within the program. The guidebook will be a tool used for future interns or adult allies when wanting to create meaningful youth participation within JS. Lastly, it can be a reminder to include JS youth in the process of choosing upcoming projects or events to participate in.

Keywords: Youth voice, youth participation, youth programs, youth and adult partnerships, youth engagement

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

Agency & Communities Served

Jóvenes Sanos (JS) is a program that was established in 2005 under United Way of Santa Cruz County. Jovenes Sanos' mission statement is, "To grow powerful skilled young leaders working towards creating a culture of health and a thriving Watsonville community, by increasing access to healthy eating and active living" (*Jóvenes SANOS*, 2021). As of 2020, Jovenes Sanos has partnered up with another program under United Way called the Youth Action Network (YAN), which was previously known as the Youth Violence Prevention Network (YVPN). With the name changing, this migrated YAN's focus on amplifying youth voices. Jovenes Sanos is supporting YAN by helping them find adult allies and youth that will collaborate amongst each other to better their community.

Jóvenes SANOS welcomes high school students residing in Watsonville City. There are ideas in recruiting early as junior high because the program hopes to smooth the transition from middle school to high school. The purpose is to strengthen the relationships amongst the youth, the program coordinator, and any other mentors. In addition, any high school graduate that wants to remain connected with JS will be given the opportunity. For instance, there are a few who have graduated and have the ability to virtually connect with the program. Currently, in Jóvenes SANOS there are roughly about 5-6 members and the goal is to have 10 members. Almost all students come from a Latino background. The program plans to recruit new members since a few of them are set to graduate the upcoming year.

Problem Description

A recurring pattern that continues to show in youth programs is the lack of youth voices and participation. The podcast *How to Get to the Top of the Youth Ladder*, has guest speaker

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

Karen Beranek discuss the importance of youth voice. Beranek (2018) lists the roles youth participate under the program she works in: “They’re the decision makers, they help with the planning process, they help with the implementation process, and they are key in the reflection process.” The youth are being actively involved throughout the process which gives them the freedom to think for themselves and collaborate. How do we hold youth programs accountable in changing their narrative’s of adults making decisions for youth into youth led decisions? JS is known for doing projects and participating in community events around Watsonville, CA. However, due to the pandemic it made it difficult for JS youth to participate in such activities. Before JS went under new management, the projects would already be decided and the youth would be asked to participate without being given the choice if it was something they wanted to help in. The youth did not have a space to voice out their interests so these projects that they were participating in were not engaging them.

Contributing Factors

When creating youth programs, there are multiple factors that should be taken into consideration. For instance, starting off with who should establish a youth program and if the delivery of the program is accurate. The Center for Community Health and Development (2021) states how the best candidates to start a youth program are adults and young people. For the most part, any adult can start up a youth program but there are two types of adult allyships: insiders and outsiders. An insider is an adult who has a connection to youth in their daily lives and an outsider is an adult who has no experience with young people but has life experience. In addition to adults, young people themselves can develop their own program because of the awareness they have around certain topics like violence, suicide, education, etc. Recruiting the appropriate

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

people into youth programs can guide young people into joining one that will help develop their personal and interpersonal skills.

Once the roles have been established, there are other key factors adults should take into consideration when creating youth programs. For instance, YouthPower believes applying a Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework can enhance youth engagement. According to YouthPower (2021), the PYD framework consists of four categories: assets, agency, contribution, and enabling environment. Under assets, adults are providing the “necessary resources, skills and competencies...” needed in order for the youth to achieve a desired outcome (YouthPower, 2021). In addition, the agency allows the youth to develop their “assets and aspirations to... influence their own decisions about their lives and set their own goals” (YouthPower, 2021). Adults need to create an environment where youth are expanding on their skills and where the youth are allowed to share innovative ideas. The purpose of using the PYD framework is for adults to get a clear vision of what their programs should include and how to encourage youth participation within it.

Even with so many youth programs out there, young people are losing the interest to join youth programs. There are different factors as to why youth are losing motivation. For example, the way are adults treating the youth within the program; are they being viewed as equals? Child Trends (2009) conducted a Youth Roundtable discussion where adolescents, who had never participated in any youth programs, expressed potential barriers that influenced their decision to participate in youth oriented programs. One of the barriers mentioned the lack of caring adults (both in and out of the program). During the discussion, Child Trends quoted a participant that stated how, “No one respected them or paid attention to them when they were younger, and they

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

wonder why people would care now” (2009, p. 3). The unfortunate truth is that a lot of youth feel this way and adults should work to learn how to better validate an adolescent’s voice. This means taking their ideas seriously and taking those ideas into consideration when making decisions. As a result, youth participation will increase since they are being treated like an equal. In addition, the youth included how programs should have adults that understand mistakes will be made. The youth are aware of how inexperienced they are in the beginning so adults should do their best to create an environment where the youth will feel comfortable to build their skills.

Furthermore, where youth recruitment is taking place can influence youth from joining. When dropping off flyers about a youth program it is best to distribute them in locations where youth will be found like a library or school office. Another way to motivate youth into joining programs is if they hear the positive feedback from other youth. More research from Child Trends (2009, p. 4) demonstrates how, “most participants agreed that they would be less likely, if at all, to listen to a program recommendation made by a teacher or a parent.” This shows how youth take their peers or friends' recommendations seriously in comparison to adults.

There is a misconception that the youth in this generation are disinterested in social change. However, around March of 2015, librarians Davis and Klett noticed that the youth and community around The Denver Public Library (DPL) could use a safe space to discuss social issues. A book discussion program was created and a book relating to present social issues would be chosen to encourage any comments and questions. To include youth participation, the DPL recruited youth from their existing programs and through their connections to schools. For example, one of the first books read in this program was *The Griots of Oakland: Voices from the African American Oral History Project* by Angela Zusman (Hem-Lee & Evans, 2018). As a

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

result, the youth were able to make connections about their identity and how they felt about their community.

Consequences

There are consequences when programs lack youth participation. It causes the youth within the community to get disinterested in youth programs. As a result, the decrease in youth participation in programs increases the unemployment and underemployment rates. According to PolicyLink (p. 3, 2016), about “22 percent of Black and 18 percent of Latino youth are neither working nor in school, [in comparison to] 11 percent of White youth.” To prevent these rates from increasing, there should be programs for youth who are unemployed and out-of-school to decrease their chances of going down a bad path. Youth programs are known gatekeepers into preparing them for life after high school.

A benefit from youth programs is having the flexibility to choose where they place their programs. This study demonstrates, “the effect of a school-based violence prevention program on community rates of violence for youth aged 10 to 18 in... communities with high rates of crime and poverty” (Masho et al., 2019, p. 529). The *Olweus Bully Prevention Program* (OBPP) was led by a bullying prevention coordinating committee that included school staff that met a couple times a year. Some examples of what their program did is host meetings that addressed topics relating to bullying prevention, emotion management, and leadership. To further its anti-bullying principles, they would use lessons from Youth Empowerment Solutions, “to foster cooperative learning, discussion, and conversations about social issues related to positive youth development and bullying prevention” (Masho et al., 2019, p. 529). In short, the program was successful because it had the schools support in reducing youth violence at a community standpoint.

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

However, there are some youth programs that can be focused on empowering youth and are not successful because the youth within the programs are sometimes passive participants. To define what a passive participant is, Voices of Youth (para. 2, 2020) describe it as, “willing to allow whatever happens to happen, and you are not changing or controlling the situation.” For that reason, this type of behavior can discourage youth into being engaging because they will realize their voices are not being heard. This is also known as tokenism, where youth are not part of any decision making processes. Therefore, youth will lose trust in the adult allies pushing them to leave youth programs.

Problem Model

Contributing Factors	Problem	Consequences
Development stages of a youth program	Youth voices are not considered in creating community programs	Youth involvement will have them being productive in a healthy way
Lack of community building between youth and adults		Youth are passive participants
Belief that youth are disinterested or disengaged in creating social change		Lack of youth voice will continue if nothing is done to change the program

Capstone Project Description and Justification

Capstone Project & Project Purpose

Jovenes SANOS is creating a guide that will include how to encourage youth participation within any program (present or future) and how adults can be better allies in incorporating youth voices within program decision making. In addition, it will contain tips on strategies that create youth participation and encourage youth into becoming leaders. Part of

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

United Way's mission is to ensure that their programs will continue to nurture youth leadership by providing them with mentors who will aid them through their experiences. United Way as a whole has recognized that there are youth who are disassociated and don't want to join youth programs due to the fact that their voices won't be heard. According to Hart (p. 8, 1992), there's a model named Ladder of Participation that explains how there are eight different levels of youth participation. At the bottom of the ladder, there words like manipulation, decorative, and tokenism, to describe youth who are used as a symbol and have no power to make decisions on their own. As the ladder progresses, the levels of participation continue to increase until the youth have reached the last level which is to initiate shared decisions with adults.

Project Justification

There are multiple strategies that can be used in creating youth engagement. However, there is not enough concrete evidence to support how effective guidebooks are. Even though the evidence is not there, the guidebook will be an accessible tool the program will have as a future reference. It will include information from observations and advice on how to lift youth voices and their participation. Especially, in a world where a pandemic momentarily shifted everyone into a virtual setting. Due to the pandemic, new challenges arose for maintaining youth engaged. For instance, there are communication barriers within virtual platforms like, "know[ing] when to talk... or how to read... a person's body language and facial expressions" when you can not physically see the social triggers (Minero, par., 2, 2020). This is an issue that was already there before the pandemic and it increased during the pandemic.

Even though the pandemic has added new challenges for youth to physically interact in programs, this unique situation has also sparked many youth to become confident in their own

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

voice using social media. According to Booth et al. (par. 5, 2020), "Over 60% of youth said... creating social media content helped them feel more informed, represented, and heard." This is a prime example of how social media is a strong gateway in elevating youth in matters happening around their neighborhood, city, state, or country, etc. It is important now more than ever to maintain youth engagement through digital platforms.

There are many articles that speak on youth engagement during the pandemic and what strategies worked best for youth participation. Some strategies to encourage youth virtual participation is to use the chat box "to ask and answer questions or type in emojis... to show whether they understood a concept [or not]" (Minero, 2020). This technique is seen in both educational settings and youth programs. In order for engagement to be successful, the adult facilitating the virtual meeting needs to make sure that the space shared allows youth to feel safe to speak up about any event they believe should be addressed. For instance, one of the youth members, she will be given the pseudonym Jane, brought up how in her community youth violence should be decreased by implementing more prevention programs. Her reasoning to implement prevention programs stemmed from a personal situation where cops refused to help until things progressed. This personal experience showed Jane how most of the time problems can be easily prevented but prevention plans usually do not get implemented until after a situation has progressed. As a result of this observation, it influenced the creation of the guidebook because youth carry their own awareness but adults sometimes fail to realize it.

The guidebook is titled "Jóvenes SANOS Talks Youth Voice and Youth Participation," and it has four sections: Why Youth Participation is Key, Hart's Ladder, Meeting Practices, and JS & What Youth Voice Means to Them. The first two sections highlight why youth participation

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

matters and what it means to have youth make shared decisions with adults. Next, the third section is a breakdown of what a potential JS meeting should include in case an intern wants to host a meeting. The last section is dedicated to the JS youth who shared their opinions on a few questions based on youth voice and participation. There were three questions asked: What does youth participation look like to you? What does youth voice mean to you? How can adults be better allies? The last section is meant to remind interns of the type of expectations these youth have and it shows them how they want to be heard and included.

Project Implementation

The guidebook was inspired from observations made in the Youth Action Network (YAN) Planning Committee. In this committee, YAN partnered up with different organizations across Santa Cruz county, that included: Aptos Community Youth Program, Community Action Board, Conflict Resolution Center, Jóvenes SANOS, and Salud y Cariño. The focus of the Planning Committee was to guide the youth on understanding their personal strengths and the strengths youth bring together in a community. This activity highlighted the importance of where youth voice is lacking around the county and the possible ways to incorporate it more. During the months of August and September, YAN developed their steering committee. The Steering committee will help YAN plan future activities to share the importance of youth involvement. This is an opportunity to reach out to more youth within areas in Santa Cruz county that are not usually mentioned. By the end of September, the youth from the Planning committee will be teaching the youth, in the Steering committee, the importance of youth participation in decision making whether it is personal or for their community.

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

Some of the responsibilities an intern takes on are transcriber and facilitator. During those meetings, the note taker is in charge of writing down important information. Some examples are: reminders for meetings, sending emails, or scheduling meetings. The notes allowed them to keep people accountable for the things they mentioned throughout the meeting. Another intern role is to facilitate breakout room discussions with the youth. These discussions would correlate with the meeting's topic. For instance, the first two meetings focused on asset mapping on a personal and communal level. The youth would create asset maps around the area they lived in and would mark places they had a positive or negative experience. In the breakout rooms, they would discuss amongst each other on why certain areas are marked the way they were. From their experiences they were able to build connections from their neighborhoods throughout Santa Cruz county. Following the same idea at a communal level, they discussed areas where youth voices were or were not present. In these breakout rooms, it is important to set the tone right for open discussion. Participating in these activities helped in creating this guidebook for adult partnerships with youth. The youth shared honest criticism on how adults in youth programs could be better.

The guidebook was created through a PDF document on Canva. The length of the guidebook is 6 pages and includes topics of why youth participation is important. The theme follows Jóvenes SANOS' program colors since it will be added as a resource for future interns. As previously mentioned, the information provided are from observations and research on how to engage youth properly. In addition, it has the opinions of what youth participation means to members in JS. The guidebook is a future tool adults or interns can use to learn how to communicate with youth so their voices can be heard. Additionally, it also includes how youth

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

should be included in decision making opportunities. The drafts of this guidebook were reviewed by the JS coordinator.

Assessment Plan

The guidebook will be evaluated while being drafted and when it is completed. This will allow any adjustments to be made and will encourage youth to gain confidence in initiating feedback to adults. To evaluate the guidebook, it will be presented to Jóvenes SANOS during a retreat at the end of October. The guidebook is meant to break down what youth participation looks like and what methods adults should use to engage with youth. Once the presentation is over, a survey will be sent out where they can provide feedback on the guidebook. It will include statements that could be answered with a scale (ranging from 1-10) to describe whether they felt this could benefit adults who want to strengthen youth participation and voices.

Expected Outcomes

Jóvenes SANOS has roughly about 5 to 6 members and they are the youth that will be evaluating the guidebook. Before the guidebook gets presented to them, there will be at least a couple drafts created that will be looked over by the JS Coordinator. Since the guidebook will be including quotes from the JS members, the goal is to have their responses in by October. After their responses are received, the finalized guidebook will be presented to them. The youth will have another survey to answer; it will be to evaluate the guidebook as a whole. The survey will be formatted with scaled questions plus a comment section in case they want to provide ideas to make it better. Majority of them are in high school (with a few exceptions of some college students) so their responses in the comment section can range from either one word responses to

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

a couple sentences. This is meant to be a future tool and having their approval would mean it highlights important tips on how to create meaningful participation.

Project Results

The guidebook took longer than expected to complete. Trying to find resources that were relevant was challenging. Some of the information that would appear would be repeated in other articles. Once the guidebook was completed the goal was to present it to the JS youth.

Unfortunately, that did not happen. The last section of the guidebook took awhile to complete because it relied on the JS youth to submit their responses to a survey; it asked them about youth participation and youth voice. Nevertheless, the completion of the guidebook was the main goal. As previously stated, the purpose is to guide the reader (future interns) to have an idea of how to spark youth participation within JS. There was never a discussion on how to evaluate its success in helping future interns, but hopefully it is something they can look back to when setting up meetings with JS.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This project gave the new JS Program Coordinator insight about what the current interns and JS youth felt. For the interns, it was learning how to engage with the youth. In the beginning, it was mentioned how JS hired a new Program Coordinator. There is already a difference between how the meetings were now versus before. Most of the things that JS wrote in their responses included how adults should consider their ideas when they are asked. They expressed how they want their ideas to be implemented instead of just being asked what they think. This shows how aware JS is if they have ideas for potential projects around Watsonville. JS's mission

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

statement is to elevate young leaders in Watsonville and this is the opportunity to have them actively participate with other community partners.

Learning the importance of youth voice and participation can help engage youth in different situations. Since it teaches adults how to listen to youth, it can be applied in jobs like Social Work. The responsibility of a Social Worker is quite different from that of a Program Coordinator, but they both require interacting with youth. Social workers advocate for their clients, and when it comes to children or adolescents a lot of their choices tend to be decided for them. If the same skills were to be applied with that population then there could be a possibility of youth receiving better care and attention within the foster care system. The system is already built for foster youth however, this can teach them how to embrace their own self awareness. Furthermore, it can teach future social workers how to look at their young clients at an equal level to decide on things that will benefit them. A lot of youth go for a while underestimating their voice and this narrative can change when youth are shown what they are capable of.

WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

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WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

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WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

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WHAT IS YOUTH VOICE AND YOUTH PARTICIPATION?

Appendix A

Scope of Work

Activities	Deliverables	Timeline/Deadlines	Supporting Staff
YAN Planning Committee Meetings	Observations/insights gathered from YAN youth	Met every 2 weeks from January 2021-May 2021	Amanda
Attended JS meetings	Observed youth participation in meetings	October 2020-October 2021	Pamela
Create guidebook on CANVAS	Content Design and Research	September	Pamela
Draft guidebook + collaborate with mentor	Collaboration of ideas	September-October	Pamela
Send JS youth survey on youth participation and voice	Elevating their voice and observations	October 30, 2021-November 15, 2021	Pamela
Completed Guidebook		November 2021	Pamela