

Youth participation in HeadStart: young people's perspectives

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Practice Unit**

A partnership of



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Executive summary

Introduction

About HeadStart

HeadStart was a six-year, £67.4 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It aimed to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10–16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. To do this, six local-authority-led HeadStart partnerships in Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton worked with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to make young people’s mental health and wellbeing everybody’s business. As a test and learn programme the funded HeadStart programme ended in July 2022, with the intention being to sustain and embed effective HeadStart approaches locally.

About this briefing

This is the final briefing in a series of three publications on young people’s participation in HeadStart. HeadStart recognises young people as competent citizens within society and believes that their opinions and views should hold value and influence the systems that they are a part of. Therefore, involving young people in interventions and services has been central to HeadStart’s local strategy development, delivery and programme legacy. We recommend reading our previous briefings (Dolaty et al., 2022; Brunskill et al., 2023) for an overview of the various models of participation that currently exist within the field and to better understand participation activities that took place across the six HeadStart partnerships.

In this briefing, we report the findings from a qualitative study that explored young people’s perspectives and experiences of participation in creating mental health and wellbeing support in schools and community spaces.

Methodology

We invited the HeadStart partnerships to identify young people who were involved in creating and delivering activities alongside HeadStart staff and who might be interested in taking part in this study. We carried out interviews with 11 young people (one or two per locality), representing a range of ages and ethnicities. We conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews and included young people's quotes that best illustrated the findings.

Findings

Perspectives on the ethos of participation in HeadStart

Young people discussed the process of collaborating with staff in HeadStart. They noted a range of different ways for participation to take place including brainstorming campaign ideas, evaluating services, running trainings and leading conferences and events. Young people enjoyed the culture that was fostered in collaborative spaces and the connections that they made with the staff members. Young people also acknowledged challenges that they faced in their participation efforts.

Perceptions of the positive impact of participation for young people

Young people reported a range of positive impacts from their participation in HeadStart programmes. These included improvements in young people's resilience, confidence and wellbeing, the development of social-emotional skills, and fostering agency, voice and power.

Perceptions of the importance of participation in shaping mental health support

Young people expressed that, from their perspective, their involvement in HeadStart was a critical component of creating programmes that addressed the needs of young people and were more youth friendly. Young people encouraged others to get involved in participation efforts as well. Some young people were sad about the funding period of HeadStart coming to an end and shared that they wished it would continue.

Discussion

The findings provide examples of how involving young people in the development of projects and services can improve the lives of individual young people and help in establishing more youth-focused and youth-friendly programmes. From young people's perspectives, participation requires a strong relationship with staff, safe and supportive spaces, and a degree of flexibility and fluidity in terms of the ways that they are involved.

Strengths and limitations

This briefing provides an in-depth understanding of young people's experiences of and perspectives on collaborating in HeadStart, drawing on qualitative interviews conducted with young people representing a range of ages and ethnicities across the six HeadStart partnerships. It is possible that additional themes could be identified with a larger or more diverse sample of young people, including those who are less likely to be positively predisposed to HeadStart.

Introduction

HeadStart was a six-year, £67.4 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It aimed to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10–16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. To do this, six local-authority-led HeadStart partnerships in Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton worked with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to make young people's mental health and wellbeing everybody's business. As a test and learn programme, the funded HeadStart programme ended in July 2022, with the intention being to sustain and embed effective HeadStart approaches locally.

The specific types of participation activities and support created and delivered by the six partnerships differed according to the needs of their local areas. For a thorough review of the diversity of participation activities that took place in HeadStart please refer to our earlier briefing (Davies, 2009). However, the six HeadStart partnership programmes had some common elements. Each partnership had a set of activities focused on evaluating

mental health support available in schools and a set of initiatives addressing young people's participation in the community. For example, HeadStart Hull awarded schools 'The Mark of Excellence' for integrating mental health programming in ways that felt safe and supportive to the young people in that locality and HeadStart Newham created a youth panel where young people can share their views and opinions on matters that impact them within their community.

The Evidence Based Practice Unit at Anna Freud and UCL worked with The National Lottery Community Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect and evaluate evidence about what does and does not work locally to benefit young people, now and in the future. Partners working with the Evidence Based Practice Unit on this evaluation included the University of Manchester and the Child Outcomes Research Consortium, a project of Anna Freud. This collaboration is called the HeadStart Learning Team. Previous partners in the HeadStart Learning Team included the London School of Economics and Common Room.

This briefing reports findings from a qualitative study conducted by the Learning Team as part of the national evaluation of HeadStart. The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of young people involved in creating and delivering HeadStart activities alongside staff. The Learning Team's interviews with young people took place in early 2022, after the initial coronavirus pandemic lockdown period. The findings presented here are relevant for school and community staff and policymakers interested in learning how young people's involvement can aid both in the creation of services and programmes promoting young people's mental health and wellbeing, and in learning how participation in these spaces impacts young people on an individual level.

Methodology

This study received approval from the UCL Research Ethics Committee (Z6364106/2021/09/65 social research). The Learning Team invited the HeadStart partnerships to identify young people with a potential interest in taking part in the study who were involved in creating and delivering HeadStart activities alongside staff. Eleven young people from across the six HeadStart partnerships (one to two young people per partnership) responded to the Learning Team's subsequent invitation to take part. Of those who provided demographic information (9 out of 11 participants), it was apparent interviewees represented a diverse range of young people

across the partnerships, including a mix of ages (15–22 years of age) and ethnicities (White, Asian/Asian British and Black/Black British) and genders (female, male and transgender or gender non-conforming).

We conducted all interviews over Microsoft Teams and we audio-recorded and transcribed the interviews. Interview questions focused on the different ways young people collaborated in creating and delivering services and programmes, young people's perceptions of their involvement in HeadStart and their perceptions of the barriers and facilitators to participation. The interviews ranged from 10 minutes to 1 hour in length, with an average length of 30 minutes. The Learning Team conducted a thematic analysis to explore themes across the interviews relating to young people's experiences of and perspectives on their involvement in HeadStart. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis method that can be used to identify patterns or themes across interviewees' experiences and perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Perspectives on the ethos of participation in HeadStart

The ethos of participation refers to the norms, ideals, and beliefs that are held in spaces where young people and adults collaborate. The three themes that were generated from the ethos of participation are (1) the process (i.e., the actions or steps) that allows for meaningful participation to take place, (2) the unique culture in these spaces, including the factors that facilitate the development of the culture and those that hinder it, and (3) the significance of the relationship between young people and the staff who worked together in HeadStart.

The process of participation

Young people described their involvement in HeadStart as fluid and flexible. Young people were encouraged to participate in the creation of HeadStart programmes and services alongside their peers and staff members in their respective localities.

Young people were invited to participate in different ways. Some ways of being involved included: brainstorming ideas for future campaigns and initiatives, networking within their schools and communities, logistical planning of conferences and events, testing out services for young people as 'mystery shoppers', and leading and delivering trainings or conferences.

They were strong on equal opportunities. So, for example, I knew I was involved in quite a lot to do with HeadStart whether that was going down to Parliament or leading conferences or getting involved in interviewing. Although, it wasn't just me it was a lot of other young people taking part of their share. So, we did a thing where everybody would have a chance to do something.

From the perspective of many interviewed, there was no sense of hierarchy or formal leadership positions in HeadStart. Young people expressed that their peers and staff had an equal seat at the table. Young people felt that those who had been actively involved for longer served as informal leaders or role models that other young people could look up to or reach out to for guidance. Additionally, young people shared that the context determined their level of involvement.

I think it was a mix of the staff and the young people. It used to be an open discussion about what we were going to do. With the conference, for example, we didn't decide that, the staff did, but we decided everything else in between: the content and how it was going to get presented and everything.

Young people reported that there was an evolving nature to the projects that they worked on. Additionally, the topics of the programmes were focused on what young people believed to be important and what kinds of resources and services they felt that they needed. Often, these resources and services were created in response to young people's own lived experience of mental health problems in their schools and community.

I think [youth programme] is good because it's so open. We can keep adding to it, we've got a training that staff are doing in schools but if we think we need to do another one, we can add another set of training on. So it's got the potential to grow and I think that's what's important.

And a lot of the campaigns come from information we get from the young people there. So, directly, what they think is going on, and what's wrong in the environment. And then we try to make the campaigns to help that.

Young people shared that at times, due to limited time and resource, they were not able to complete campaigns or produce outputs as the team had originally discussed or imagined. Young people expressed that these limitations could impact the establishment of the culture of participation. However, young people also acknowledged that these limitations did not deter them from creating outputs that helped their community and peers and that they would problem-solve as a team and find alternative ways to move forward.

Sometimes it was funding – you just don't have the money to push it out there.

I wish there was more campaigns going on at the same time. But I think that's hard to do with the limited number of people that we have.

Young people reported that working in a team sometimes involved conflicts with peers. Specifically, young people identified that some individuals would give feedback that could feel harsh or disrespectful during discussions and group brainstorming. These moments seemed to give rise to opportunities for young people to work on social skills, advocate for their thoughts and opinions, and build tools to resolve peer conflicts.

You need to be careful with how you speak to other people; you need to behave this type of way. Not restricting them, but obviously having it so that other people don't feel uncomfortable. And 100%, it is a challenge, and there are a few times where some of our youth panel members don't feel... not that they don't feel safe, but they don't feel the best in that situation. So, we'll have to... so I, for example, I'm the one that mainly brings it up. I'll talk to [co-production lead] or [professional], or... whoever I have to speak to, to make sure that everyone else feels secure and comfortable in the space.

Many of the young people discussed the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on their involvement in HeadStart. Specifically, young people shared that moving to an online modality resulted in a lack of desire and motivation to be involved. Additionally, some of the campaigns and projects that were set to take place could not continue due to the lockdown. During this time, young people reported that they focused more on social activities and time together to mitigate some of the isolation and loneliness that they had felt during the pandemic.

It shut down a couple of our projects that we really wanted to do. Because, like everyone else, we thought initially it would be, like, two weeks, so we'd start doing it over Teams meetings, and then it just kind of dragged on from there. And then we realised we didn't... nobody really liked doing the meetings online, so everyone's motivation dropped off.

A different kind of culture

Young people shared that a different kind of culture was created in collaborative spaces. Together, young people and adults established and agreed on rules and boundaries that contributed to a sense of safety and support for all. Young people described the space as judgement free and inclusive, with an air of openness and a sense of equality. Young people felt as though they could 'show up' authentically and that it was okay to make mistakes in this space. In particular, young people enjoyed how diverse HeadStart was and that they were able to meet people from different walks of life.

In school everyone kind of thinks everyone is normal, and they don't really understand that this person might be nervous of presenting or might really not know much about this topic but is still trying. It's not very accepting, in a way it's kind of just stick to the line, stay on the line, but in HeadStart it's kind of run across the line, jog on it a little bit and then stop, and then get off it. It's very safe to make mistakes.

Young people described HeadStart as something separate and unique from other aspects of their lives. In particular, some young people expressed that their experience in HeadStart contrasted with their experience in school. In school, some young people felt a power imbalance between teachers and young people and that expressing feedback would cause teachers to be defensive. Conversely, in HeadStart they felt that their ideas and opinions were taken seriously and that the staff welcomed young people's perspectives on services, campaigns and projects.

It makes us feel heard. That's definitely the first thing. It makes us feel heard. And also, it makes us feel like we don't have any stupid thoughts. Because, for example, if I was at school and I was like, "Miss, maybe this, this and this wasn't the best way you could have handled the situation," they would be like, "Okay, so you're telling me I don't know how to do my job?"

There were some facilitators that contributed to this culture of participation for young people, which included: the relationship with staff members, being provided with training and resources, flexibility and fluidity of their involvement in HeadStart, spending time together socially and being part of fun activities outside of service creation or delivery.

It keeps everything lighthearted and quite youthful. I was very worried that when we were planning it's just going to be straight adult stuff, budgeting, money, decorations and stuff, but we're very fluid, so we're allowed to have fun. We do have fun a lot. We play a lot of games in between.

Young people expressed appreciation for the flexibility and fluidity of their roles in these collaborative spaces. Staff members allowed young

people to be involved in ways that felt most comfortable and accessible to the young people themselves. When young people had outside life commitments or increased stressors they were supported by staff to take time for themselves without fear of losing their connection to the community.

You could be involved or not involved, as you wanted to. Because it's not like a binding contract, so, "Oh, yeah, you're part of HeadStart, so you must be involved in this." It was never like that. It was always, "There's this stuff available; you can be involved in it if you like to be; it doesn't mean you're not a part of HeadStart if you don't get involved with this; you're still a part of HeadStart; you're still open to support."

Young people reported that there were also some barriers to this culture of participation, which included: young people's own mental health problems and the intensity of the topics related to mental health, tokenistic involvement and lack of buy-in from outside organisations. Specifically, young people who experience their own mental health problems may have needed additional supports put in place to discuss potentially triggering topics related to mental health.

The topic about talking about mental health in general, it is a hard one for me. I don't really want to go into that. So, it's very hard to contribute to those times without getting overwhelmed yourself. There were a few days where I just wouldn't say anything, my hands would be down, and I'd just be in my own world, but the staff always made sure to make an effort to ask you anyway, and if you didn't have anything to say, they wouldn't push you.

Young people also discussed that tokenistic involvement, especially from outside organisations partnering with HeadStart, affected their ability to produce young-person-led outputs. Tokenistic involvement was recognised at times when organisations expressed interest in the young people's ideas but did not utilise the young people's feedback or follow-up with the young people after their initial consultation. In response to these experiences, HeadStart staff members and young people set up checks and balances that helped recognise which organisations were ready to involve young people appropriately.

I'd get invited to speak about young people's issues, and then not get to speak about them. And that's, again, about checking a tick box, like, checking a box saying, "Oh, I've done that." And it's usually coming from organisations who say they're for young people. So, we had a lot of similar stories with... there was, like, companies and things, and we just wanted to make it better.

The power of the relationship

Young people spoke at length about the relationships that they had established with staff members throughout their time in HeadStart. Specifically, they mentioned that staff were a big part of creating a culture of participation and contributed to the young people's desire to both share their feedback and perspectives and to continue attending HeadStart participation sessions. The three characteristics young people most often mentioned were staff members' ability to build rapport, staff members being seen as trustworthy individuals and staff being champions of young people's ideas.

Mine would be 100% working with the staff. I feel like that played a major factor within HeadStart, because through HeadStart I got to work with a lot of different members of staff. And the staff play apart and factor in how a young person responds to a certain campaign or an activity so without these staff doing their job correctly and being so nice and welcoming, we wouldn't have the outcome that we did on the campaign. So I feel like they were the reasons.

Young people attributed the strong rapport that they had built with HeadStart staff to the adults' abilities to actively listen to the young people and encourage their ideas. Additionally, young people shared how staff took time to build individual relationships with them and checked in with them outside of working on HeadStart projects and campaigns. For some young people, staff served as mentors they could learn from. They expressed feeling supported and cared for by HeadStart staff.

She builds the type of rapport where you can tell her anything. Of course, if it comes down as a safeguarding thing, she will have to bring it up with her manager or whatever, but as much as she has to do her job, she doesn't make you feel like, "Oh, if I tell her this, this and this, I'm going to get shamed, or I'm going to get some sort of judgement."

Young people reported that HeadStart staff "went to bat" for them as young collaborators and championed their ideas. Young people shared that staff members gave them support and guidance on projects and made accommodations when they needed additional help to participate. Staff also served as intermediaries for young people and were persistent with outside organisations and more senior figures in the HeadStart programme to ensure that the young people's ideas came to life.

Because usually, in other groups, it would be a case of, "Oh, we tried one time. They said no. They've said no. They've said no." But no, they were saying, "We'll listen to the young people, and we'll make this happen," you know. That's what they did; they always made sure whatever we suggested would happen.

Young people valued the feedback loop that existed between staff and young people in HeadStart. Young people felt comfortable and confident

giving feedback to staff, seeing the staff as trustworthy individuals. Specifically, young people reported that staff were transparent in their communication, respected young people's thoughts and opinions and were able to take feedback without judging young people.

You've got to be able to trust them, especially in this field. You have to be able to trust your team because some of the things that you come out with can be touchy subjects and if you don't trust your team and what you're telling them, whether that's about you or other people, you just have to have a safe environment with people that know what they're talking about but are also open.

Perceptions of the positive impact of participation for young people

Young people reported that their involvement in participation activities had a positive impact on them. The three themes surrounding positive impact included (1) development of their own selves, (2) reciprocal feelings of support, and (3) an increased sense of agency, voice and power.

The development of self

Some young people became involved in HeadStart projects for their own self-development. Young people shared that being part of creating and delivering HeadStart activities and initiatives gave them professional skills like how to implement community projects, time management, networking, public speaking and assessment of services. Additionally, this time in HeadStart helped young people learn more about their own future aspirations and professional goals. Some young people saw HeadStart as a gateway to employment or increased opportunities in their community.

It's helped me get interview skills, because I'm very good at interviews now, whereas before I wasn't any good at them. I actually really struggled with them. Whereas now I've been in so many HeadStart meetings, on Teams and that, I know basically all of the systems inside and out and I'm good at meeting interviews and it also gives me something to put on my CV.

Young people felt that they had gained more self-awareness and insight about themselves during their time in HeadStart. Specifically, young people mentioned that they had developed a belief in their own selves and their capabilities, gained confidence and learned new coping

strategies. Additionally, some young people reported that they had experienced a shift in their view of the world around them. They began to embrace change and see the positives in the world.

Well, when I first joined HeadStart I wasn't as confident as I am now, so I wasn't able to actually to do meetings by myself and I always used to have the worry in my head, "If I say something, is it wrong?" Whereas, with HeadStart over the past couple of years, I've been able to develop my confidence.

Young people also reported gaining social-emotional skills including learning how to be adaptable and flexible, increase their resilience, practice perspective taking, communicate with others effectively, give peers feedback and problem-solve. They also developed new connections and friendships with peers in HeadStart and felt part of a community.

I think also being able to communicate with each other, because obviously, not everyone's going to want to be friends, but you're going to have to put up with each other. Like, even if you don't like each other, you're going to have to put up with each other, and you're going to have to be able to communicate, otherwise you aren't going to get what you want done.

The reciprocity of support

Some young people became involved in collaborative projects to give back to their community. They shared that they had had lived experience of mental health problems and had received support from HeadStart, and wanted to feed back their knowledge into the programmes and services.

My experience with HeadStart has been something that I never thought that I would do before. So, it all started, really, with me receiving help from other mental health services, and then it slowly became me being involved in helping others with their mental health, as well as mine. So, as I was healing from my personal trauma as a child, I was also helping others by sharing my experience and doing projects that young people can understand.

Young people enjoyed serving as both role models and representatives for their peers. Specifically, young people involved as collaborators encouraged their peers to reach out to professionals for help with their mental health problems. They also facilitated other young people becoming involved in HeadStart.

Me having that voice and that representation within HeadStart was very important because I was able to represent people like my friends.

Young people discussed the importance of increasing their own knowledge of mental health and learning more about the resources available to them in their communities. Additionally, young people shared that they were able to engage with others about mental health in different ways and had learned to be more empathic of the difficulties that others face with their mental health.

I think I'm more wary of other people's mental health. I don't think I wasn't before, but I wasn't as informed about it as I am now. So, it kind of makes me take a bit of a different approach with some people.

Young people shared that their involvement and participation in HeadStart gave them something to do and was a helpful distraction from their problems. For some young people, it helped them to make meaning and gave purpose to their lived experience of mental health stressors.

For my own mental health, being able to help others and having a voice that I know is making a difference is definitely what's helping me. Being able to sit here and tell other people things I've been through.

Young people also expressed that when they were experiencing difficulties with their own mental health they appreciated the consistency and stability of HeadStart. During these times, young people were able to identify and reach out to adults who they felt recognised the importance of mental health and were comfortable asking these adults for support and resources.

I think it was supporting my mental health, making sure my mental health was supported. Because I have complex PTSD which means I struggle all the time with like flashbacks and all that stuff. And sometimes I have no motivation to do stuff. So in order to do all these programmes I needed someone to support me and listen to me and that is where [co-production lead] came in.

Young people also shared that staff were aware that some mental health topics may be uncomfortable or triggering for individuals who had lived experience of mental health problems or stressors and as such, staff ensured that they were safeguarding young people and encouraging them to engage in the topics in ways that felt comfortable to them.

Before every sort of heavy topic, the adults will remind everyone that if we need to leave we can, sort of the basics of, "If you don't want to talk about something, you don't have to. If you want to say something that you think's important to the conversation but you don't want to say it in front of everyone, you can talk to us afterwards," and things like that. So, even if you do have a personal story but you don't want to share it, you can still share it in a different way.

Agency, voice and power

Through their participation in HeadStart, young people felt an increased sense of empowerment, autonomy and value for their voice and opinions. They described having a sense of agency in terms of feeling useful and impactful and that their feedback led to changes in their community. Some young people commented on how their involvement in HeadStart had contributed to an internal locus of control – or the belief that they themselves, not external forces, had the ability to influence outcomes in their lives. Specifically, they spoke about their power to impact the campaigns, projects and services they collaborated on.

I feel like I actually made a difference, and influenced decision-making, and had some sort of level of autonomy doing things. So it's not just things are done for me, but I can actually do things.

Young people reported that they felt heard. They were encouraged to share their perspectives and reported that their opinions were listened to and acted on. Young people expressed their right to input and valued their voice and opinions.

I think it was the whole idea that someone listened to me, understood me, and listened to my ideas, and brought my ideas to life and I wanted to engage with her. I wanted to engage with life then – I am going to keep saying my ideas and people actually did start listening.

Power and decision-making were shared within these collaborative spaces and young people were encouraged to take on leadership opportunities through HeadStart. These leadership opportunities included: leading a project or campaign, giving a talk or training at a conference or event, advocating for young people's needs and/or establishing mental health resources and services alongside other organisations. Young people enjoyed the sense of autonomy and feeling of empowerment that they gained through these activities.

I felt like I could do more than just be a volunteer at that point. I was a leader; I was a mentor; I was a helper. You know, I was doing so many different things, while just being there, and I never felt so... I don't know, useful, I guess, in any job that I've been in.

Perceptions of the importance of participation in shaping mental health support

Young people vocalised the importance of their participation in shaping mental health support. Specifically, they discussed how their involvement helped improve how the initiatives were received by other young people and how they added an element of creativity to the projects.

Young people's involvement as a key ingredient to mental health support

Young people expressed that their involvement in these spaces was vital and necessary. They shared that they had insight into what young people want and need from mental health support. Additionally, they felt that sharing their perspectives led to more creative outputs and young person friendly services. They felt that it would be of benefit to integrate programmes like HeadStart, which focused on participation in mental health services, into school spaces. However, some young people were skeptical of whether the culture of participation could be fostered in a school environment.

It becomes more young person friendly right? It becomes more young person orientated. We get much bigger young person engagement because it is young person led and young person run. Because young people are leading it you can clearly tell it is young person friendly. Even the wording of stuff, change it around to make it more young people orientated.

Young people also encouraged others to become collaborators in mental health services, projects or campaigns. Specifically, they pointed to their self-development, acquisition of professional development skills, and satisfaction with contributing to their community and peer group as reasons why other young people may be interested or motivated to be a part of collaborative spaces as well. However, young people did note that individuals who valued community contributions and sharing their perspectives openly with others would have the most benefit from being involved in these programmes.

So I know that people who might think, "Okay, you know what? That's really lame. I won't do it," if they try it they might genuinely like it a lot, and then it won't only help other people's mental health, it will help theirs as well, because it helped mine.

Young people expressed excitement and passion for both the campaigns they worked on and the outputs that were created from their participation efforts. Young people shared that they felt a sense of pride and satisfaction for their involvement in HeadStart. Specifically, they felt they had contributed to quality improvement of mental health support and the creation of outputs that addressed the current needs of young people. Some young people expressed worry or sadness that HeadStart was reaching the end of its funded period. They reported that they wished that these programmes could continue as they felt that they had made both a personal impact on the young people individually and a larger impact on their communities.

"How do we improve this?" "How do we make it better?" And I do it in school too. And I'm a teenager and I am like – "Guys we should be able to do this together, like, what are your ideas, what are your diverse ideas?" So I think that quality improvement and co-production has become my personality now. I am always thinking – "How do we improve this?" "How can we do better?"

Discussion

Collaborating and being involved in creating mental health programmes may result in positive outcomes for young people with lived experience of mental health problems

Many of the young people who collaborated on HeadStart projects were experiencing their own mental health stressors or difficulties. Through their involvement in HeadStart, they were able to share their own stories and contribute to the development of programmes that could help other young people who may be facing the same difficulties. This ability to both share their own lived experience and contribute to the betterment of their community elicited positive feelings for the young people involved including giving them a sense of meaning or purpose, allowing them to find their voice and agency and identify individuals who could support them on their own mental health journey.

Essential components for effective participation with young people include establishing safe and supportive spaces, fostering strong relationships with staff members, and being fluid and flexible in terms of how young people are involved

Young people identified a certain ethos and culture that HeadStart staff were able to develop and that helped their participation efforts. Specifically, taking time to establish rules and boundaries that contributed to a safe and supportive environment helped young people to open up, be willing to make mistakes and show up authentically. Additionally, staff members who checked in with the young collaborators, spent time building rapport and were seen as transparent and trustworthy were able to build strong relationships that motivated young people to continue collaborating in these spaces. Lastly, allowing young people to be involved in different ways and providing a degree of flexibility and fluidity in these roles helped young people to continue their engagement in the activities even when they had outside commitments and responsibilities.

Services that are created with young people's participation may better address young people's needs and be more inviting and young person friendly

Throughout the programme, staff encouraged young people to discuss how they could be better supported with their mental health and wellbeing in school and community spaces. These discussions led to

outputs that were shaped by the needs of young people. Additionally, young people shared that they were able to utilise their creativity, knowledge of current trends and use of technology and social media to establish more inviting and young person friendly services. Though they also highlighted some limitations (e.g., tokenistic efforts and whether it is possible to incorporate a culture of participation in all settings), these young people reported a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment for the campaigns and initiatives they were involved in creating. Overall, Young people felt they had contributed to quality improvement of mental health support and the creation of outputs that addressed their current needs. Having influence and decision-making power in the creation of these outputs may have contributed to the young peoples' positive views of the programmes too.

Strengths and limitations

This briefing provides a rich description of young people's experiences of and perspectives on HeadStart, drawing on in-depth qualitative interviews that the Learning Team conducted with young people across the six HeadStart partnerships. However, it is important to note the following limitations:

- Only 11 young people were interviewed as part of this study and HeadStart staff recruited those individuals. Therefore, the findings only illustrate the perceptions and experiences of a small, purposively selected sample of young people.
- We may have identified additional themes with a larger sample of young people or with a sample of young people who were not selected by staff in HeadStart, as the individuals interviewed may have been positively predisposed to HeadStart.
- Young people's appreciation for being involved may have meant they were less willing to be critical of any areas that could be improved.
- The findings indicate areas where young people's participation in programmes like HeadStart could be improved, some of which (e.g., putting checks and balances in place to safeguard against tokenism) may be more feasible than others (e.g., more funding and resources needed to be able to deliver more support and give staff more capacity).
- The idea that participation creates better mental health support would benefit from further testing and evaluation. More research is needed to understand how both professional expertise and the involvement of young people impact the interventions themselves.

Implications

Our findings suggest the following implications for stakeholders involved in the development of mental health programmes and services for young people:

Establishing a culture of participation in school and community spaces may serve as a key factor to improving young people's mental health

Our findings provide examples of how involvement in programmes like HeadStart can contribute to young people's development and wellbeing. However, careful consideration is needed by staff in school and community spaces to ensure that the culture of participation they establish is non-tokenistic, fostered and maintained. Additional resources may be needed in these environments for the involvement of young people in programmes like HeadStart to be welcomed and positively viewed.

Focusing on strengthening relationships between staff and young people may help in the retention of young people in mental health and wellbeing programmes

Young people's perspectives about their involvement in shaping HeadStart activities has broader implications for how we better engage young people in mental health support. Our findings indicate that mental health and wellbeing programmes should have an emphasis on strengthening relationships between the staff and young people involved. Staff members are a key component of young people's desire to be involved in services. The findings show that alongside the opportunity to actively contribute to the initiatives and projects themselves, when young people feel supported, cared for and respected, they are more willing to engage in the programmes and continue to attend sessions. However, programme delivery teams need to be mindful of the constraints on their own capacity, including the extent of the support that they can offer to young people.

Meaningful participation of young people in mental health programming may rely on identifying staff members who have the right skills and behaviours to foster safe, supportive and collaborative spaces

Staff members play an essential role in establishing a culture that fosters young people's participation. However, it cannot be assumed that all adults are able to create safe, supportive and collaborative spaces with and for young people. Rather, it is the staff members who have demonstrated a set of skills and behaviors (e.g., genuine power sharing and championing for young people's ideas and opinions, the ability to address and resolve conflicts that arise in group settings, and care for young people outside of the project or initiative) that allow for meaningful participation to take place. Attention should be given to ensuring there is capacity within the professional group to be able to deploy these relational skills and to continue fostering these behaviors and skills in school and community spaces.

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