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Published online: 13 Jul 2020.

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Authentically engaging youth with foster care experience: definitions and recommended strategies from youth and staff

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ABSTRACT

Child welfare service providers in the United States are increasingly acknowledging the importance of engaging youth with foster care experience in case planning, policy advocacy, and practice change. However, evidence for how to do this well is still quite limited. This study aims to answer two research questions: a) How do youth and staff/professionals define/conceptualize authentic youth engagement (AYE)? and b) What are youths' and staff/professionals' recommended strategies for authentically engaging youth? Thirty stakeholder interviews (15 youth, 15 staff/professionals) and 81 surveys (46 youth, 35 staff/professionals) were completed. Four themes emerged regarding conceptualizations of authentic youth engagement, while three themes emerged regarding recommendations for authentically engaging youth. These perspectives offer valuable insight into overcoming barriers related to authentically engaging youth in service provision, policy, and practice.

Engaging youth meaningfully in service provision and policy improvement is a current trend in youth work. Traditionally, youth have been viewed as passive recipients of policies and services being created, implemented, and overseen by adults. This is especially true for youth in the foster care system. However, the value of youth input continues to grow with increased recognition that effectively supporting youth is only possible when youth are fully involved in the process (Matarese, McGinnis, and Mora 2005; Hall 2019). This study explores the concept of authentic youth engagement as it applies to youth with foster care experience, and provides a variety of youth – and staff-generated recommendations for how to go about meaningfully engaging youth in policy and practice change.

Conceptualizations of youth engagement

Several conceptualizations of youth engagement exist. One is Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation (1997). This hierarchy is comprised of eight rungs, from the lowest, 'manipulation' (youth non-participation, adults using youths' voices to convey their own agendas)

to the highest, 'child-initiated, shared decisions with adults,' with multiple steps in between (e.g. 'tokenism,' 'consulted and informed,' and 'adult-initiated, shared decisions'). This conceptualization frames youth engagement as a continuum, across which youths' initiation and collaboration vary (Hart 1997). Other conceptualizations are based on a positive youth development framework and consider youth engagement a means to enhancing positive development. Matarese and colleagues emphasize the mutual benefits of youth engagement, noting that youth engagement both promotes positive development and enables programs to 'utilize [youths'] expertise in enhancing systems transformation' (2005, 3).

Engaging youth in foster care

One field of work that has seen a substantially increased focus on youth engagement in policy and practice is work with youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood. Youth aging out of care frequently experience disempowering circumstances. For example, decisions related to youths' placements, education, and other crucial domains are often made by adults without youths' input (e.g. Geenen et al. 2007). Furthermore, youth are often not made aware of their rights or eligibility for critical resources, such as independent living services or postsecondary funds (e.g. Geenen et al. 2007). Youth in care are also frequently hindered from 'normal' developmental opportunities, such as dating, learning to drive, and getting a job (Simmons-Horton 2017), despite federal legislation aimed at prioritizing normalcy (e.g. the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014).

While youth in care tend to frequently experience disempowering circumstances, engaging these youth meaningfully is crucially important. To successfully transition from foster care to adulthood, youth need to take an active role in the preparation process. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 requires that states involve youth in determining the services they need for transitioning to adulthood. Both the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act of 2014 build on this by requiring youth to lead the development of a written transition plan and allowing them to engage trusted adults that they select to be part of this process.

In addition to engaging youth in transition planning, foster youth-serving organizations are increasingly acknowledging the importance of engaging youth in policy and practice change. Youth advisory boards have been instrumental in the successful passage of major reforms and initiatives on both state and national levels, including the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program in 1999 as well as more recent legislation addressing housing stability, higher education tuition assistance, sibling support, and other areas of need (e.g. California Youth Connection 2020).

Strategies for engaging older youth with foster care experience

Organizations have taken a variety of approaches to engaging foster youth in transition planning and policy and practice change. One method is helping youth develop self-advocacy skills. Several intervention approaches, including TAKE CHARGE/My Life (Powers et al. 2012) and Achieve My Plan (Walker, Seibel, and Jackson 2017) are empirically supported self-advocacy focused approaches for improving transition-related outcomes. Another

engagement approach is youth leadership skill development. This approach often combines training in leadership and advocacy skills to bring about change for youth in care. Youth advisory boards, councils, and coalitions provide supportive environments that facilitate youth advocacy for policy and practice. As Forenza and Happonen (2016) state, '[Youth engagement boards] offer our most vulnerable youth the chance to civically engage and to address their needs in a guided, supportive environment' (112) where policymakers are able to hear the perspectives of youth on matters that affect their lives. A 2016 review found there to be a foster youth board, council, or coalition in every state and Washington DC (Forenza and Happonen 2016).

Youth-adult partnership is an additional engagement approach, in which adults treat young people as full partners and share decision making power in program and organizational processes. Youth-adult partnerships have been used in a variety of settings, including schools, child welfare systems, and community building efforts. Nationally, the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative has demonstrated the power of youth-adult partnership in improving policy and practice, noting such partnerships 'build on the strengths of each group, and the program or activity is stronger than one devised and delivered individually by either group' (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2015, 16).

Benefits of engaging youth

Research has linked youth engagement to numerous positive outcomes, including academic performance, expectations, and engagement in learning (Fredricks and Eccles 2006; Powers et al. 2012); reductions in internalizing and externalizing behaviors and substance use (Zeldin 2004; Fredricks and Eccles 2006; Webb et al. 2017); political involvement (Fredricks and Eccles 2006); respect and altruistic behavior (Zeldin 2004; Webb et al. 2017); and serves as a protective factor for reduced involvement in risky behaviors (Catalano et al. 2004; Zeldin 2004; Powers et al. 2012). In addition, organizations that actively involved youth in decision-making experienced positive changes in their organizational culture, with youth-adult partnerships synergizing to help shape the organization's mission, encourage community involvement, and promote interest from funding sources (Zeldin et al. 2000). A more recent study found multiple individual- and community-level outcomes resulting from foster youth civic engagement, including increased youth opportunities as a result of access to those in power, increased youth competence in taking an active role in the empowerment of themselves and other youth in care, and more positive conceptions of the child welfare system (Forenza 2016).

While consensus seems to be growing about the importance of engaging youth with foster care experience, how to go about doing this effectively is still developing, and there is still limited evidence for many of the approaches discussed above. This study aims to contribute to the growing knowledge about how youth and staff think about youth engagement and their recommendations for doing this well.

Challenges to engaging youth with foster care experience

There are a variety of challenges related to meaningfully engaging foster youth in transition planning and other activities. One key challenge that differentiates this population from others is the absence of family members to participate in the engagement process.

Many approaches in the realm of positive youth development, for example, utilize parents as a key tool for enacting the engagement process (Catalano et al. 2004). For youth in care this is often not viable, even if the engaged parent is a foster parent, because of the high rate of placement mobility (Oosterman et al. 2007). Frequent placement and school mobility causes a host of additional challenges related to engagement. Mobility can interfere with trust and relationship building, which are already challenging for youth in care due to prior maltreatment as well as experiences of loss when separated from their family of origin (Fox and Berrick 2007). Mobility can interrupt important connections a youth has made in their placement, school, or neighborhood that, once interrupted, may be hard to maintain or less appealing for youth to re-make in new settings (Fox and Berrick 2007).

Factors related to restricted freedoms often experienced by youth in care can also impede effective youth engagement. For example, in the 2017 federal fiscal year, approximately 13% of children in care were placed in group homes or institutions (US Department of Health and Human Services 2018); the percentage is even higher for older youth in care. Residential treatment centers and group homes can be quite restrictive and often do not permit youth to participate in outside activities, such as sports teams, family gatherings, or community events (The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2015). Furthermore, youth in care often need social worker permission to participate in age-normative activities such as overnight trips, and coordinating details such as state funding for and transportation to and from activities can also be prohibitive and hard to obtain in a timely manner. As youth approach age 18, a new challenge to engagement sometimes emerges. Many youth are unhappy with the experiences they have had while in care (Courtney et al. 2010) and thus may be uninterested in engaging in optional system-related services or opportunities that could ease their transition to adulthood or contribute to policy and practice improvement. There are also some challenges to youth engagement that originate with adults who support them. Not all adults believe in or are willing to support the underlying tenets of youth engagement, such as youth-initiated actions and shared decision-making power. Bell (1995) defined the term adultism as 'the systematic mistreatment and disrespect of young people' that can be reflected in a variety of behaviors, including denying youth control over their own experiences. Studies have found some adults in youth work and other positions of influence to be suspicious or dismissive of youth-led efforts, and/or unwilling to partner with them, share decision-making power, or treat them as peers (e.g. Conner 2016; Havlicek, Curry, and Villalpando 2018).

Additional challenges to engaging youth that have been identified in research include maintaining youth engagement over time, multiple opportunities competing for youths' time, limited funding and staff time to do the work well, and complex and slow-moving child welfare bureaucracy (Augsberger et al. 2019).

Organizations and practitioners thus have a variety of barriers to overcome in their efforts to meaningfully engage youth. The current study aims to offer youth and staff/professional perspectives on how to engage youth with foster care experience, that may be helpful in overcoming some of these barriers.

Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative's approach to authentic youth engagement

One organization with large focus on meaningful youth engagement is the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative®. The Jim Casey Initiative is a system-level intervention designed to

improve the educational, employment, permanency, housing, parenting readiness, health, and financial capability outcomes of youth aging out of foster care. It currently operates in 17 states in the United States. The Jim Casey Initiative's approach aims to combine youth engagement, community partners, policy education and implementation, and direct practice to enact change at the individual, community, state, and national levels.

The Jim Casey Initiative refers to its youth engagement efforts as 'authentic youth engagement,' and has made this a cornerstone of their work. They describe authentic youth engagement (AYE) as 'young people fully understand[ing] their rights and responsibilities … actively lead[ing] the process of making decisions on issues that affect them in order to support their successful transition to adulthood and a healthy, productive adult life' (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, n.d.). They aim to authentically engage youth in all facets of their work, including practice and policy change, advocacy, evaluation, and community partnerships, among others.

Strategies utilized by the Jim Casey Initiative for authentic youth engagement include youth leadership boards, community partnership boards, self-advocacy training, leadership experiences, youth-adult partnership training, and actively involving youth in developing and evaluating programs and services. Youth leadership boards provide an opportunity to advocate for change on practices and policies directly impacting them and/or other youth in care. Board members attend trainings on leadership and advocacy, and many travel out-of-state to collaborate with other youth and interact directly with key policymakers and legislatures. The Jim Casey Initiative also engages youth through taking an active role in ongoing program development and evaluation. For example, the Opportunity Passport®, a financial literacy training program that the Jim Casey Initiative provides to youth, relies on continuous youth feedback to help shape how the program can encourage youth to save for and buy assets such as a car, housing, or postsecondary education, or grow assets through building their credit or starting a business. An overview of the Jim Casey Initiative's approach to AYE is included in Figure 1.
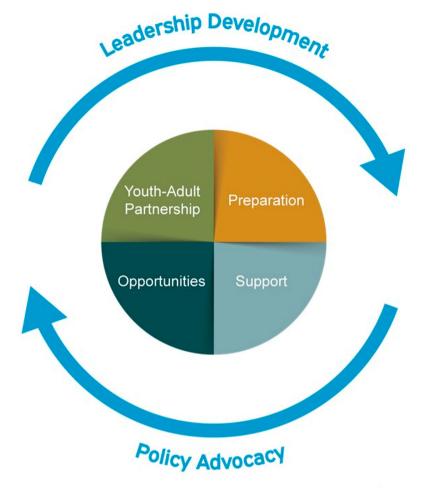
Current study

The Jim Casey Initiative recently participated in an evaluation of their AYE efforts in order to develop a better understanding of AYE in their sites: what it means, how it operates, what works and does not work, and recommendations for strengthening the work. The current study is part of this larger evaluation, and uses qualitative data from youth and staff/professionals involved in Jim Casey Initiative work to answer two research questions:

a) How do youth and staff/professionals define/conceptualize authentic youth engagement?
b) What are youths' and staff/professionals' recommended strategies and approaches for authentically engaging youth?

Method

The research team for this study consisted of one doctoral-level faculty member, two masters-level research assistants, and two undergraduate Human Development students.

Source: Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative

Figure 1. Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative Continuum of Youth Engagement. Printed with permission from the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative ®.

Three of the five researchers had either lived or professional experience with the foster care system.

Sites

Four states in the United States that implement the Jim Casey Initiative participated in this study: Georgia (Georgia Youth Opportunities Initiative), Hawai'i (HI HOPES Initiative), New Mexico (New Mexico Child Advocacy Network, or NMCAN), and Tennessee (Tennessee Department of Children's Services). These states were selected by Jim Casey Initiative staff based on an internal rubric intended to identify sites with strong AYE practices, as the focus of the larger study was to develop a deep understanding of AYE practices in settings where it is going well. In addition, sites were selected based on location to maximize geographic diversity.

Data collection and participants

Two types of participants were recruited for participation: youth and staff/professionals. Eligibility criteria for youth included (a) being age 18 or older (it was determined to not be feasible to have sites go through lengthy state child welfare system research review processes in order to be able to include children in the study), and (b) having been engaged in at least one qualifying Jim Casey Initiative youth engagement activity in the past year (i.e. youth leadership board, community partnership board, Initiative self-evaluation work, policy agenda work, work to influence public will, work to increase youth opportunities and support in the community, and/or self-advocacy). There were no eligibility criteria for staff/professional participants other than having knowledge of their site's AYE efforts. Participants were identified and made aware of the study by local Jim Casey Initiative staff, using guidance from the research team regarding how to select a diverse pool of potential participants in relation to life experiences/ perspectives, gender identities, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, parenting status, and geographic region, among others. Participants were recruited by the research team.

Interviews. Interview questions and semi-structured protocols were developed by the research team, in partnership with Jim Casey Initiative and Annie E Casey Foundation staff and two Jim Casey Initiative Young Fellows (i.e. young leaders with lived experience in foster care who are involved with Jim Casey Initiative work nationally and in their local communities). Topics explored in the interviews included recounts of participants' experiences with AYE, barriers to youth engagement that they had observed, lessons learned, and recommendations for strengthening efforts to authentically engage youth, among others. Example interview questions that elicited responses of particular interest for the current study included 'What does authentic youth engagement mean to you? In other words, how would you define authentic youth engagement?' and 'What are some ways the Jim Casey Initiative can do better at engaging youth to help them meet their transition goals?'.

Interviews took place by telephone with a trained research staff member. Interviews lasted approximately 30–60 min, and were completed between October 2018 and January 2019. Nineteen youth and 19 staff were invited to participate in an interview. Thirty stakeholder interviews (15 youth, 15 staff/professionals) were completed (78.9% response rate). Youth participants were emailed a $50USD gift card for their participation. Table 1 provides interview participant demographic information.

Surveys. Survey instruments were also developed by the research team, in partnership with Jim Casey Initiative and Annie E. Casey Foundation staff and two Young Fellows. Measures were included, adapted, or developed from sources including the *Youth Engagement Toolkit Evaluation Tool* (Youthrex 2013), *Youth Involvement in Systems of Care* (Matarese, McGinnis, and Mora 2005), and various youth engagement-focused documents from the Jim Casey Initiative. The current study utilized data from a subset of open-ended survey items, an example of which was

> Please think about the ways you have been engaged with the Jim Casey Initiative site staff. What recommendations would you give to staff about ways they can better engage youth in Jim Casey Initiative activities? What worked or did not work for you?

Table 1. Interview participant demographics.

	Youth (Total *N* = 15)		Staff (Total N = 15)	
	N	%	N	%
State				
Georgia	3	20.0%	3	20.0%
Hawaii	4	26.7%	4	26.7%
New Mexico	4	26.7%	4	26.7%
Tennessee	4	26.7%	4	26.7%
Gender				
Female	10	66.7%	14	93.3%
Male	4	26.7%	1	6.7%
Other/ Did not respond	1	6.7%	0	0.0%
Race/ Ethnicity				
Black/African-American	4	26.7%	3	20.0%
White	2	13.3%	6	40.0%
Hawai'ian/ Pacific Islander	3	20.0%	2	13.3%
Other/ multiple races	6	40.0%	4	26.7%
Sexual Orientation				
Lesbian/ Gay/ Bisexual	2	13.3%	2	13.3%
Heterosexual	12	80.0%	13	86.7%
Did not respond	1	6.7%	0	0.0%

Surveys were conducted through web-based Qualtrics survey software and took participants approximately 20–30 min to complete. Surveys were completed between December 2018 and March 2019. Eighty-one surveys (46 youth, 35 staff/professionals) were completed, out of 68 youth and 43 staff/professionals invited to participate (73% response rate). Participants were identified and made aware of the study by Jim Casey Initiative staff and recruited by the research team. Youth participants were given a $25USD participation incentive. Table 2 provides survey participant demographic information.

Table 2. Survey participant demographics.

	Youth (Total N = 46)		Staff (Total N = 35)	
	N	%	N	%
State				
Georgia	12	26.1%	8	22.9%
Hawaii	12	26.1%	11	31.4%
New Mexico	9	19.6%	5	14.3%
Tennessee	13	28.3%	11	31.4%
Gender				
Female	33	71.7%	28	80.0%
Male	9	19.6%	6	17.1%
Other	1	2.2%	0	0.0%
Did not respond	3	6.5%	1	2.9%
Race/ Ethnicity				
Black/African-American, non-Hispanic	11	23.9%	8	22.9%
White, Non-Hispanic	11	23.9%	13	37.1%
Hispanic/ Latino, any race	9	19.6%	3	8.6%
Native Hawai'ian or part Hawai'ian, non-Hispanic	6	13.0%	1	2.9%
Other/ multiple races, non-Hispanic	3	6.5%	6	17.1%
Did not respond	6	13.0%	4	11.4%
Sexual Orientation				
Lesbian/ Gay/ Bisexual	10	21.7%	4	11.4%
Heterosexual	27	58.7%	26	74.3%
Other Identification	5	10.9%	1	2.9%
Did not respond	4	8.7%	4	11.4%

Analysis procedure

Recorded interviews were transcribed using a professional transcription service. Data were analyzed using Dedoose qualitative data analysis software. The analysis approach was conventional thematic content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). Coding of each transcript was completed by at least two researchers (at least one of which had a graduate degree). Coders followed a detailed coding protocol, and were instructed to look for and code text that provided answers to the stated research questions. Coders used a consensus-based coding process, in which each coder independently coded the text, reviewed each other's codes, discussed any discrepancies, and came to a mutually agreed-upon coding solution. Codes were then grouped into themes to provide a succinct set of answers to each research question. Separate codes and themes were derived for youth participants and staff participants, in order to be able to compare their responses. Open-ended survey responses were reviewed in light of the themes emerging from the interviews in order to assess validity of the themes, as well as to contribute additional context and example participant quotes. Each site was sent the study findings in the form of a final report. Sites were given the opportunity to provide feedback on study findings prior to the finalization of the reports.

Results

'How Do Participants Define Authentic Youth Engagement (AYE)?'

Four themes emerged from analysis of staff and youth definitions of AYE. Table 3 lists these themes and codes that contributed to each.

Theme 1: Youth-adult partnership and connection. The first theme in defining AYE is meaningful youth-adult connections. Youth and staff/professionals discussed the importance of this connection, based on honesty and understanding, as pre-requisite to a working relationship. One youth said, 'If you're not honest it can't be authentic.' One staff/professional explained the importance of 'understand[ing] where [youth are] coming from … and just be[ing] able to truly identify what their needs are.' Youth and staff participants agreed that listening is critical and connection is facilitated when youth can be their authentic selves, express their emotions, and talk about their past.

Another part of youth-adult partnerships is staff intentionality in engaging youth. As one staff member described youth engagement as a way to 'help them meet their own personal goals, and desires… grow [as] individuals.' A youth specified further, 'to really engage young people is something beyond their story, that really uses their expertise and their story as a way to professional development.' When adults are intentional about engagement, they work with youth 'in a way that's accessible … that they're understanding of what is expected of them' and 'that they feel that they can contribute in a way that is comfortable for them.'

Staff/professionals 'meeting youth where they're at' and supporting youth in clarifying their goals is another aspect of youth-adult connection. One youth said, 'the fact that they just take the time to understand, like, who you are that counts.' The youth described how understanding someone is the 'catalyst for the authenticity of the engagement.' Talking with youth about their strengths, needs, and goals enables adults to provide effective supports. As one staff/professional offered, 'meeting the person where they're at to really

Table 3. Themes emerging from participants' definitions of Authentic Youth Engagement (AYE).

	Codes Contributing to Each Theme		
Themes	Codes Represented by Both Youth and Adults	Youth-Specific Codes	Adult-Specific Codes
Youth-Adult Partnership and Connection	• Building partnerships based on honesty and trust • Being intentional about youth involvement • Helping youth set their goals		
Youth Empowerment/ Voice/ Agency	• Youth feeling supported enough to share their stories • Self-determination • Youth having a voice	• Youth have decision-making power	• Youth support other youth
Adult Engagement and Skills	• Adults listening to youth without prejudice/bias	• Providing different kinds of support • Youth outreach • Cultural responsiveness • Being adaptable to change • Not tokenizing youth	• Empathetic, genuine, honest, transparent adults • Provide opportunities for community and youth engagement • Provide trauma-informed care • Adults having and applying understanding of youth development • Mentoring youth
Making Change/ Having Impact	• Advocating for system change • Empowering others	• Youth-driven community outreach • Growing as a community • Youth making an impact	• Youth opportunity to learn skills

listen and hear where it is that they want to be … And then being able to authentically [engage] without sugar coating but also without telling them what to do.' When it comes to goal setting, the interactions between youth and staff/professionals should be youth-led. One staff member said staff do 'not necessarily always provide advice, but the opportunity to listen and allow [youth] to work through things, and [staff] being that person to work through it with them.' In other words, staff/professionals work to empower youth in developing their own goals.

Theme 2: Youth empowerment/ voice/ agency. The second theme conveys the importance of empowering youth through developing agency and amplifying their voices. As one staff said, 'the engagement part with the youth, it empowers them.' Youth report feeling authentically engaged when given opportunities to use their own voice to advocate for change. One youth said, 'authentic youth engagement, to me, is where a youth voice is in the forefront of practices, principles and policies.' Another youth explained, 'I would define authentic youth engagement as youth that are at a table and engaging … about what they feel they would need. Like what is their best path.' A staff/professional built on this, stating, 'authentic youth engagement … mean[s] when we have young people at the table with lived experience, regardless of what that means.' Another staff/ professional expressed the importance of showing youth they are necessary for change, stating, 'really embedding [youth] as part of the work as a necessity, not as a bonus.'

Youth and staff often referenced a link between the amplification of youth voice and youth feeling supported by staff and other youth to share their stories. One staff/professional explained that 'Our approach is always to honor and respect the young person's story and voice as something that is, I use the term, "sacred".' Youth reported how they share/use their stories 'to add leverage and to show resiliency,' and 'with our stories [adults] look at us as professionals and as the experts.' Youth sharing their stories not only allows other youth and adults to see a range of perspectives and lived experiences, but invites youth to shape their own narratives. As a staff/professional expressed, 'hav [ing] a voice is something huge, and then it empowers them to change their situations … because they feel, well now, maybe, at a time before in my life, I didn't have control over the situation, but in this instance I do. I have a voice and I'm affecting change.'

Theme 3: Adult engagement and skills. The third theme in defining AYE deals specifically with characteristics of the adults who engage youth. Staff/professionals and youth discuss the importance of adults listening to youth without prejudice or bias. One youth explained that an adult would need 'to put their biases and put their own perspectives aside to fully engage and listen to what a young person is saying.'

In getting to know youth, staff/professionals also have the responsibility to understand how trauma may impact adolescent brain development. One staff/professional said,

> … there is a responsibility on the part of the adults that are engaging with [youth] to be aware of their needs, to be aware of some challenges they may be facing, and that's where adolescent brain [development] comes in, that's where knowledge about trauma comes in.

Staff should also be able to identify youths' strengths. As one staff commented, 'I consider engagement to be talking to [youth] about what their needs are, but also their strengths – what they do well, and how they can use those strengths to be able to contribute to their success.' Staff/professionals also mention being able to '[train] youth to make sure that they are ready to present their stories' and 'prepare the youth to be involved in the community and to share their voice in an effective way and in a way that doesn't re-traumatize them' as critical skills for adults to have when authentically engaging youth.

Theme 4: Making change/ having impact. Finally, the fourth theme involved impacts resulting from authentically engaging youth. Participants discussed how youth advocating for policy change in systems that impact their future is part of being authentically engaged. As one staff/professional shared, 'young people are an ongoing part of the discussion, the evaluation, and the review of the work that's happening. It directly impacts them or their peers.' This was expressed by another staff as, 'nothing about young people without young people.'

Most participants reported AYE included youth being able to witness the impact of their advocacy. One youth said of AYE, 'when we're participating in something … our actions have results.' Staff/professionals see how youth evolve as a result of telling their stories and feeling they are part of something bigger; staff 'do a lot of training with youth to make sure they are ready to present their stories … I think that really helps the youth to both learn a new skill [and] become really good self-advocates.' Youth include community connection as part of making change. One youth stated, 'I believe that community, getting more connections and building that community is very important in a young person's life.' A staff member echoed this, stating, 'We partner with young people to build community and lead change.'

'What are the Lessons Learned and Recommended Strategies and Approaches for Authentically Engaging Youth?'

Analysis of interview and survey data resulted in three themes around recommendations for authentically engaging youth. These themes are summarized in Table 4.

Theme 1: Recommendations related to building trust, relationships, and connections with youth. A youth interviewee expressed the importance of trust, stating, 'Developing trust is huge … if you don't have a [trusting] relationship with that youth, they're not gonna be able to trust what you're saying.' This was reiterated by staff, 'if you want the youth's buy-in, if you want them to trust you, that really building the relationship is key.' Understanding that building trust is a time-intensive process, one youth explained that trust should be built 'slowly and not rush[ed].'

Youth and staff/professionals suggested specific strategies for building trusting relationships. Validating youths' feelings is one crucial strategy: 'validating like, "Hey, what you have to say matters," and that gets me pumped, because somebody is interested in what I have to say,' as one youth said. Another youth suggested building connection through,

> … reinforcing the positives instead of the negatives and letting them know, "Hey. I'm not just here just to talk to you and write you down on a piece of paper and tell them I met with you for the month. I'm here to actually help you to better your future."

Staff/professionals shared a similar opinion, expressing that staff need 'to make the time and be intentional about being that adult supporter.'

Table 4. Themes emerging from participants' recommendations for authentically engaging youth.

Recommendations Related To …	Example Recommendations Shared by Youth and Adults	Example Youth Recommendations	Example Adult Recommendations
Building trust, relationships, connections with youth	• Use multiple modes of communication (i.e. social media, email, phone/text) • Adults should be non-judgmental in communication and listening styles	• Be patient when establishing relationships with youth • Be available when youth need someone to talk with	• Exemplify through your actions youth are heard/understood • Focus on establishing youth-adult partnership • Meet youth where they are, do not force trust/relationship building
Being youth-centered and youth-empowering	• Allow youth to engage where they are comfortable • Seek out youth feedback AND use it to create change • Keep youth aware of participation/engagement opportunities	• Provide peer-to-peer mentoring opportunities • Create opportunities for youth to practice self-advocacy, use their voice	• Give youth an active role in planning programs and activities • Prioritize youths' goals instead of program goals
Facilitating improved adult/staff/program efforts	• Be transparent about organizational changes	• Train staff to be open-minded about youth experiences • Increase underrepresented youth participation	• Provide continuous staff training • Maintain staff engagement and investment • Create partnerships with community members and community organizations

Regarding relationship building, one adult suggested that staff, ' … need to be genuine and they need to be honest … honesty goes a long way, and transparency … just letting them know this is what it is … ' Other staff recommended strategies like, 'to listen, to try and avoid biases, to try and understand different cultures … allow yourself to get to know the youth that you are trying to engage and meet them where they are.' Another staff explained, 'I always keep … notes on hand when I meet with young people so I can always say, "Hey, yes. I remember you telling me that you wanted to go to school to be a welder."'

Once established, youth-adult partnerships often provide youth with an adult who shows support, makes them feel heard, and is there to help process challenges. Reflecting on a personal challenge, one youth recalled a time when a staff member, 'walked me completely through the situation, was there for me, helped me gather information about it so I wasn't I guess so anxious about it.' Another youth reported, 'knowing that my adult supporters would be there for me when I needed them' provided reassurance. 'Being there' also includes adults listening non-judgmentally and following through on any plans made with the youth. As one staff member explained, staff/professionals facilitate connection by being 'consistent to the point of predictability. So we'll text them once a week and say "hey, we're still here, hope you're doing good."'

Theme 2: Recommendations related to being youth-centered and youth-empowering. A second recommendation theme is being youth-centered and youth-empowering, in which participants saw the potential to bolster youth agency, advocacy skills, and self-determination. Staff/professionals recommended ways to become more youth-centered, including 'listening to youth and valuing their ideas and opinions,' 'being consistent, being enthusiastic, and intentionally engaging youth right from the start, spend[ing] the time getting to know them and listening to their voice, and helping them cultivate their own ideas,' and 'just listening, I think sometimes we do a lot of talking around the young person, and we don't necessarily listen … they pretty much tell us everything that we need to know … ' Program staff felt youth were the experts in identifying what they need to succeed. Through listening, staff will learn where they can step in to be supportive.

Another approach to being youth-empowering includes, as one staff/professional participant explained, 'involving the youth in planning for programs and activities before they are scheduled.' Youth should be engaged in event planning, execution, and debriefing. In addition, soliciting 'feedback … asking the youth at events, in workshops … what their needs are' provides opportunities for reflection, self-advocacy, and opportunities for youth to be heard and develop agency. One youth shared, 'It doesn't matter how much the youth is involved or how much power they're given, if they're not thinking that they can change something, then they won't.' Youth engagement should also include youth who are more reserved and may not otherwise be heard. One youth suggested 'mak[ing] sure the shy, quiet kids are in some manner discreetly or otherwise acknowledged.' Staff should be intentional in soliciting youth feedback and providing space and time for youth to create change.

Another facet of youth-empowerment is peer-to-peer relationships. One youth said, 'I just feel that there needs to be an expansion of shared knowledge amongst young people with each other. And there needs to be like dedicated spaces to that.' Another youth suggested pairing older youth (with more experience) with younger youth (just joining the Jim Casey Initiative), simultaneously empowering older youth and teaching

advocacy skills to younger youth: 'the young ones coming up benefit from having older ones' to learn from.

Theme 3: Recommendations related to facilitating improved adult/ staff/program efforts. Finally, participants provided recommendations related to improving adult supports and program efforts, including allowing frontline program staff who have first-hand knowledge of youth circumstances to influence how the organization and programs evolve over time based on what they perceive as working well. One staff working directly with youth expressed frustration for when 'program managers and coordinators are not asked what works and what does not work.' Like youth, staff can be empowered to be 'champions … who can be influencers' that effectively advocate for youth. Without staff champions, 'behaviors are so ingrained institutionally that unless we can get to that place where folks have that "aha" moment … we find that they stay entrenched in the same ole same.' Empowering frontline staff as champions is also critical to cultivating program buy-in from direct program staff.

Youth recommendations for improved engagement-related program efforts focused largely on identifying and increasing involvement of youth from underrepresented groups such as 'young people who are experiencing incarceration or homelessness.' Other youth participants brought up the need to authentically engage more youth of color, youth who identify as LGBTQ, and male-identifying youth. Staff suggested word of mouth and peer outreach as key to increasing both the number and diversity of engaged youth. As one staff said, '[youth] need that extra reminder, that extra push about the event … its helpful for them to know if their older [sibling] or if one of their friends is going to be there.' Staff also recognize that staff diversity is important to increase the number of underrepresented youth. One staff explained, 'our young men reacted better to programs and services and opportunities where other young men were, or [that had] male leaders. And, it's a very female dominant field.' Another staff noted the need for awareness of changing demographics and identities of youth, ' … the changing demographic kind of snuck up on us, in our child welfare system. I'm like, there is a growth in [the] Latin population … So we haven't had a targeted strategy towards recruiting [Latinx youth].'

Discussion

Youth and adults had many shared perspectives on what constitutes AYE, as well as how to go about achieving it. Though four distinct themes emerged in participants' responses to how they defined youth engagement, the theme *adult engagement and skills*, in practice, is often a pre-requisite to the realization of the other three themes (*youth-adult partnerships, youth empowerment, making change*). When adults are authentically engaged and have sufficient skills to work meaningfully with youth (often developed through sufficient training, resources, and supports), they are better equipped to listen to youth with an open perspective and to be aware of their own biases and the effects of trauma and adolescent brain development on behavior as they enter each interaction. Authentic adult engagement is at the core of AYE, enabling the relationship building necessary for effective youth-adult partnerships, facilitating youths' feelings of support that empower them to engage, and paving the way for youth-driven system change. Relatedly, many of the recommendations in the current study offer several strategies

for preventing the emergence of adultism (Bell 1995) as a barrier to engagement. For example, participants highlighted the importance of basing relationships on mutual trust, sharing power, allowing youth to decide when and where they engage, being transparent in all aspects of the work, and providing continuous staff training to be able to do youth engagement work well.

The definitions of AYE found in the current study share many similarities with elements of the upper rungs of Hart's Ladder of Children's Participation (1997). In particular, shared decision-making power was a strong similarity between the two models. In addition, the current findings share similarities with Matarese and colleagues' (2005) emphasis of mutual benefits for both the outcomes of youth directly involved in the work as well as broader system change that continues to benefit other youth for years to come. This study's findings also share similarities with some themes found by Augsberger (2014, 2019) and other researchers, and serve to help build consensus regarding the importance of lifting up youth voice, sharing power, and building meaningful relationships, while also providing additional context and examples for key approaches to youth engagement from the perspectives of both youth and staff/ professionals.

Implications for practice

Many factors known to create challenges for authentically engaging youth were reflected in the current study's findings. For example, broken relationships and subsequent complications related to building trust are well-documented challenges faced by youth in care that complicate program efforts to authentically engage them (e.g. Augsberger 2014). However, key elements of AYE in the current study included building meaningful youth-adult partnerships and connections, and many recommendations for authentically engaging youth involved building trust. Similarly, while highly restrictive placements and policies make it difficult to engage youth (e.g. The Annie E. Casey Foundation 2015; US Department of Health and Human Services 2018), key elements of AYE in the current study included empowering youth and giving them agency over their lives. These findings suggest that, in order to engage meaningfully with youth, many of the negative and often traumatic experiences they have experienced in the past must first be addressed.

In the current study, staff/professional participants were mindful of the importance of preparing and supporting youth in strategically sharing their stories to avoid re-traumatization, but less frequently discussed barriers to engaging youth in the context of the effects of trauma. For example, youths' initial resistance to relationship building and the need to invest a significant amount of time up front to nurture trust between youth and adults results from trauma. During the trust-building process, it is important for staff to recognize that this resistance has been *adaptive* for the youth in the past, protecting them against further trauma (US Center for Substance Abuse Treatment 2014). Understanding initial resistance and 'survivalist self-reliance' frequently exhibited by youth transitioning out of care as behavioral relics of trauma allows staff to work through these potential barriers and continue providing consistent and responsive support to youth. A trauma-informed approach is especially critical in engaging youth from underrepresented groups who disproportionally experience trauma both before, during, and after their time in foster care, including youth of color, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth experiencing homelessness.

Working with youth who have experienced severe trauma is taxing and can be especially challenging in child welfare, where programs are frequently downsized or reduced, staff turnover is high, and bureaucracy complicates youth participation. Thus, addressing barriers to hiring, training, and maintaining an adequate number of qualified staff to support AYE is key. In addition, staff who work closely with youth are at risk of experiencing secondary trauma (US Center for Substance Abuse Treatment 2014, p. xviii). Staff burnout and turnover resulting from secondary trauma inhibits the trust building process, which, as a youth interviewee expressed, can only be accomplished 'slowly and not rush[ed].' To ensure that staff are able to build trust with youth through consistent, responsive support, it is critical that staff are also receiving the support they need to continue authentically engaging youth. Having healthy, trauma-informed workplaces facilitates AYE through empowering both staff and youth to maintain appropriate boundaries, seek support, and practice self-care. Workplaces can minimize staff experience of secondary trauma through practices that educate all staff on secondary trauma, encourage open discussion and processing with peers, and offer professional development opportunities to learn and practice strategies to prevent secondary trauma symptoms (US Center for Substance Abuse Treatment 2014).

Limitations

Several limitations of the current study must be noted. First, the study had a relatively small sample size of participants, only youth aged 18 and older were included, and the participants were not randomly selected from all eligible site youth and staff/professionals. Furthermore, only four out of 17 Jim Casey Initiative sites were included in this study. These circumstances could result in biased results. In addition, the data were only collected at one time point, offering a cross-sectional view of AYE; a longitudinal design may have resulted in alternate findings. Furthermore, because this study was focused on how AYE worked in sites, youth who were not engaged were not included in the study. These youth could have provided a helpful perspective on what may have kept them from being authentically engaged.

Conclusion

This study's findings provide specific strategies for authentically engaging youth with foster care experience; it is hoped that programs and organizations can use these to more effectively embed AYE into their structure and functions.

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

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