Three Years of Youth Participation in the Community

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Youth Forum Ltd, a statewide youth organisation with extensive experience in supporting action research initiatives of young people throughout New South Wales, prepared a submission which was presented to the Law Foundation of New South Wales for a crime prevention project in the region using young people as its agents.

The Youth and the Law Project Concept

The key question about youth crime prevention that the Project has faced from its beginning is 'who should own the problem?'. It is in the nature of people to value most what they have produced themselves. The home handyperson who spends eight weeks making a ratty old coffee table is likely to value this table more than one purchased from a store. Whatever approach that was to be used to reduce crime in the region would have to be owned by young people. If we could not do this, the Youth and the Law Project would fall into the same category as other additions 'dumped' on the region—an under-utilised art gallery, a picnic area vandalised because the residents did not want it, a railway bridge that people will not use because it is in the wrong place.

The bottom line for our Project is: 'if young people want it—given support, they will do it'.

This approach carries its own risks and rewards. The risk is that we as staff, as adults in the community, as decision makers, may be forced to support ideas and projects that we do not agree with.

The reward is that all the resources this project produces, all the physical things it makes, the ideas and ideology it promotes—will be accepted and protected by the young people of the community.
Forum Projects

The Project is based largely on the belief that many crimes perpetrated by young people are based on unfulfilled needs.

Young people have a need for interesting and entertaining things to do, a need for security and a safe environment, a need for employment and creative and productive pastimes, a need for socialising with their peers, a need to take risks and to be independent and a need for success.

When one or more of these needs are not met, young people can, amongst other alternatives, take out their frustration through activities which are destructive to society—vandalism, theft, shop stealing, violence and others.

One way of meeting these needs is to join a graffiti gang. Graffiti gangs are social—you meet new people, they are productive learning experiences—participants begin by learning to ‘tag’ walls and after serving their apprenticeships, move on to more adventurous works. They provide security within a peer group and are obviously a way of exerting independence from adults. They are, of course, risk-taking enterprises—the risks escalating from the risk of being discovered, to the risk of death and injury. As a form of behaviour, they are, however, unacceptable to the mainstream of society. Graffiti offends our aesthetic senses, we associate it with violence and insecurity. The Youth and the Law Project aims to provide a socially acceptable alternative to this sort of behaviour.

The Project is based around action research initiatives—called Forum Projects. As a part of a Forum Project, young people:

- identify a pressing problem facing young people in the region;
- research the background to the problem;
- decide on a range of solutions to solve the problems;
- plan a project to implement this solution; and
- implement the solution.

Forum projects are by no means a simple process. They generally take between eighteen months to three years to complete.

The Life of a Forum Project

Forum Projects begin with a gathering of young people and this happens in two ways. The Project holds an Annual Community Youth Forum involving 150 young people from schools, youth centres, refuges and skillshare schemes throughout the region. Young people attend the Forum in groups and bring with them a short presentation about an issue of concern to them. These presentations happen over the first two days. For the final two days, young people meet with others interested in the same issue. They brainstorm possible solutions to the problem, agree on the solution they will implement and plan a strategy for its implementation. The Forum ends with a presentation from each workshop group, detailing the plans for the next year.

The second way is through a Workshop Day. Workshop Days focus on a single issue and have been held to develop solutions to problems such as vandalism, drug and alcohol abuse and the problems facing young people from non-English speaking backgrounds. The format of the day involves both skills development for the young people who attend and the development of a solution to the issue of the day.
The next step is for the group to meet. Young people who attend each of these events are invited to attend meetings afterwards.

Generally groups meet with a staff member to pursue their objectives. It is the role of the staff member to assist the groups in making contact with people in the community who can help them meet their objectives, plan skills development, maintain communication with the group and provide research and information services to the group as they need it.

The staff of the Project are 'door openers' for the young people and skills providers. These skills range from simple, but essential, skills such as how to use a telephone book, arranging and running meetings, to more complex skills such as dealing with decision makers in the area, and writing press releases. The skills a group learns very much depend on what the group is doing. The one area in which staff do not contribute is in the area of deciding objectives and directions for the group.

The next step is to make contact with the community. The Youth and the Law Project is about communication with the community and gaining access to the resources on offer there. As a 'door opener' the staff make contact with people who Forum Project participants decide are appropriate to their needs.

The final step which occurs through the life of the Project, is to succeed. We recognise that one of the most positive experiences young people need to have is one of success. For this reason, all Projects must succeed.

The Process

Forum Projects are the principal way the Youth and the Law Project operates. Some of the other elements of the Project that directly support this facet of our Project, but are in themselves discreet projects include:

*Community Youth Forum*

The Community Youth Forum in itself is not a significant event. Its only purpose is to begin Forum Projects. However, it provides a number of positive 'spin-offs' for young people.

*Group leaders*

As a youth event, the Forum should be run by young people. At a Workshop Day held in February, fifteen young people are elected to run the Forum. They attend a five-weekend training program to plan the conference and learn how to run seven workshops leading to Forum Projects, and six 'Getting to Know You' sessions.

Teachers, youth workers, local aldermen and others attend the Forum as participants, but upon arrival, the organisation and running of the Forum is in the hands of these fifteen young people.

*Workshop days*

Workshop Days are one-day events focusing on a particular issue, and are the tools the Project uses to contact and involve particularly disadvantaged young people. Young offenders, homeless, unemployed young people and young people from non-English speaking backgrounds are unlikely to attend the four-day Forum, because it is simply too threatening. We have had success in making contact with these young people through Workshop Days.
The Community Youth Forum also provides a learning experience for young people whose only contact with the Project is the Community Youth Forum. All participants give a twenty-minute presentation to explain to the other participants their views on a particular issue. For most of the participants this is the first time they have had the experience of being up-front. Schools and youth centres are asked to provide information about the Forum to young people who are not normally offered this opportunity.

We are not after debaters, nor public speaking champions—we are after young people who want to do something about the issues—not just talk about them.

For many participants, this is the only opportunity they have had of working with other young people in a cooperative environment. They learn about their values and the twin skills of making oneself heard and understood and of listening to others.

All of the activities of the Project are attended on a voluntary basis. For this reason we plan that there is something in it for everyone.

If young people decide to be involved in a Forum Project, a Forum or a Workshop Day there are certainly many positives along the way. Often young people use one or more of these linked activities as a stepping off point to more long-term involvement. At other times they may take what they have discovered and that is all.

The program of the Youth and the Law Project is to provide opportunities—opportunities that are not available in the community as it stands. Young people may decide to use them as they wish—but making that decision—to be involved or not involved, is also a learning experience.

Community links

The staff of the Project are represented on, for example, network committees, management committees, and regional planning groups, within the area.

Implications for crime prevention

The Project cannot show that through its existence there is less juvenile crime in the region. The Project facilitators work in differing capacities with about 300 young people each year and the problems of evaluating that figure amongst a group of 60,000 others are staggering to say the least.

Adding to the area

It can be seen that part of the reason for youth crime in the region is the lack of facilities and services for young people, and the young people have reduced this problem by:

- writing a booklet to explain the legal system;
- improving relationships between young people and police;
- providing a vehicle for young people's views to be represented in the media;
- producing a discussion kit about child abuse;
- creating and running an under-18's nightclub; and
- lobbying the Campbelltown City Council to provide skateboarding facilities.

Before the Project began in 1985, there was little or no consultation with young people by decision makers in the area. Young people as part of the Project have radically changed this situation.

Instances of such consultation include: attending police briefings; discussions with the Mayor regarding skateboard facilities; discussions at Council meetings regarding the Child Abuse Kit and Drug Education Project; and discussions with Members of Parliament, at both state and federal levels regarding a planned multicultural festival.
These experiences are positive ones for both the young people and the decision makers. Young people learn that people in these positions are approachable and helpful on many occasions, and for decision makers it is often one of the few opportunities they have to meet ordinary young people. In terms of access, these positive experiences also open conduits of communication between other young people and the powers that be as well.

Role modelling and the press

Months of reviewing the local press failed to find any positive reporting of young people. In fact, young people who were reported in the media were drug addicts, murderers, rapists and car thieves. On top of this, young people soon see that the young people who seem to attract the most attention at school and at home by welfare and other authorities are the troublemakers. A clear message is given to young people that the best way to be noticed is to steal something, burn down a school or stab someone.

At the Youth and the Law Project great lengths have been taken to promote and publicise the positive activities of young people. The response of the print media to the flood of material has been gradually to print more and more of these positive stories.

The most important role models of the project are of course the young participants themselves. Through their peer groups, these participants are providing a model that says 'It's OK to be productive, it's OK to do useful things'.

Participants in the Youth and the Law Project are not all convicted offenders, but they are also not all the brightest, most articulate kids in the area either. Most are young people who are seen by their friends as being fairly ordinary people—but, to coin a cliché, they are doing fairly extraordinary things, and by doing so, showing their friends that we have within us all, the capability of being extraordinary.

Skills building

Society seems to be, by its nature, competitive. Through their involvement in the Project, young people learn skills which allow them to compete better. They learn how to communicate, how to set and achieve their own goals, how to organise, work with, and in, groups. These skills enable young people to compete for jobs, for education, for access to services and in general allow them to take a place in our society rather than to fall through the gaps and become offenders.

Involvement in this Project is not a panacea for all the social ills of our society, but young people possessing these skills are better able to deal with the problems that face them.

Self-esteem

The core of the Youth and the Law Project hinges on using all of its activities to encourage a feeling of self-worth amongst the participants.

The participants in the Youth and the Law Project are learning to chase success and if a criticism of the Project is that it makes too much of small successes, it is a criticism that we will wear emblazoned on our shirts, because we firmly believe that self-worth is brought about by these successes. Even when a Forum Project group fails to meet its goals, there must be enough successes along the way to make it worthwhile for all concerned.

Diversion
Finally, whilst the Project was set up as a preventive and not a diversionary scheme, it does serve the diversionary role that any drop-in centre serves, that being, that whilst young people are occupied in the activities of the Project, they cannot be engaged in destructive activities elsewhere. It is, however, a product of the processes of the Project, and not its aim to act in this way.

Conclusion

The Youth and the Law Project is a juvenile crime prevention project where young people act as the agents of crime prevention.

The key to the success of the Project lies in five main areas:

- Young people are doing things that are 'real'. Young people are 'almost adults'. They want to take action on real issues. Anything less would not be accepted.
- Young people are running the Project. Young people want to exert independence and take risks. The Project provides an environment that allows them to do this in positive ways.
- The natural complement of taking risks and responsibility is that the successes of the Project are owned by the participants. Young people involved in the Project, their friends and peers, recognise that the pursuit of positive change in the area is worthwhile, enjoyable and interesting.
- The community benefits from the Project by reaping the rewards of Forum Projects. An essential element of the Project is that it shows adults that young people are willing and capable of improving the area, and dispels the largely 'media-presented' myth that all young people are ratbags.
- The Project is open to, and taken up by, all young people. Participants in the Project come from all walks of life and promote the belief that these goals are attainable by all—and not the chosen few.