Making Co-design a Reality in Youth Services: A Suggested Way Forward to Integrate the Perspectives of Young People, Service Providers and the Broader System

Samantha Lai, PhD Candidate, University of Adelaide/Sonder, Dr Tracey Dodd, Director, Research Development, Adelaide Business School, Steven Wright, Executive Manager, Youth Services, Sonder, Dr. Sarah Fraser, Executive Manager, Innovation and Excellence, Sonder

Unfortunately, young people's voices are still not being as fully represented or considered in the design of services which impact them, as service providers and policymakers fail to drive change and translate this lived expertise into practice.[1] This does not need to be the case. Indeed, method of co-design, where consumers, stakeholders, and service providers come together to plan and implement new service models, has become increasingly accepted.[2]

Co-design is more than sticky notes on a butcher's paper. It speaks to a design-led process that create genuine and safe (enough) conditions for people with diverse backgrounds and lived/living experience to be involved in solving contemporary issues they have experienced or are experiencing in the present day.[3]

Co-design has captured the attention of the youth sector for multiple reasons. In its ideal form, co-design bridges the gap between young people, service providers and organisations, policy makers and decision makers by mediating power differentials that often prevent new ideas to be considered. The process frames young people as the experts in the room, encouraging unique problem definitions and problem solving that considers all possibilities. Thus, new innovations are identified, implemented and the 'actual problem' is solved.[4]

Co-design creates room for failure. It gives the youth sector time to try new ideas, to not rush into solutions, to learn from what failed and to do better alongside young people. As failure is often feared, co-design creates opportunities to channel failure, view it in a positive light, and transform it into success.

Most importantly, co-design encourages change. At times, service providers, policymakers and decision makers are 'tunnel visioned' in their brainstorming and decision-making process, operating on funding guidelines, assumptions far beyond reality and instead of genuine human experiences. Co-design provides a facilitated environment for these assumptions to be challenged, educating service providers, policymakers, and decision makers on the reality of situations.

Artwork by Christine Thirkell

delivery. In addition, they must be allowed time, space, and permission to be immersed and honest in co-design efforts to ensure co-designed insights and solution ideas are 'market ready'.

3. The broader system must invest and commit to co-design itself, if it is attempting to normalise co-design as a necessary process for all service organisations. It must also allow for co-design to be done authentically, providing service organisations with blank canvas to create and innovation without being influenced by service delivery requirements dictated by funding bodies.

This change cannot be done alone. Instead, everyone must be committed to work together to enact on these ideas. This way, the voices and wisdom of young people can be amplified and translated into practice, ensuring young people are receiving the appropriate care they want, they need, and are entitled to receive.

Endnotes

1. Mulvave G, Moll S, Miatello A, Robert G, Larkin M, Palmer V J, Powell A, Gable C and Girling M 2018, 'Co-designing health and other public services with vulnerable and disadvantaged populations: Insight from an international collaboration', *Health Expectations*, vol. 22, pp. 284–297.

2. Lewis J M, McGann M and Blomkamp E 2020, 'When design meets power: Design thinking, public sector innovation and the politics of policymaking', *Policy and Politics*, vol. 48, no. 1, pp. 111–130.

3. McKercher, K A 2020, *Beyond Sticky Notes: Co-Design for Real: Mindsets, Methods and Movement*, Inscope Books.

4. Lewis J M, McGann M and Blomkamp E 2020, op cit.

5. Orygen 2022, *'Co-designing with young people'*, Orygen, <https://www.orygen.org.au/Training/Resources/Service-knowledge-and-development/Guidelines/Co-designing-with-young-people-The-fundamentals/Orygen-Co-designing-with-YP-the-fundamentals?ext=.>

6. McKercher K A 2020, op cit.

7. Freebairn L, Occhipinti J A, Song Y J C, Skinner A, Lawson K, Lee G Y, Hockey S J, Huntley S and Hickie I B 2022, 'Participatory Methods for Systems Modelling of Youth Mental Health: Implementation Pool', *JMRI Research Protocols*, vol. , no. 2, pp.1–23.

8. Trischler J, Dietrich T and Rundle-Thiele S 2019, 'Co-design: From expert- to user-driven ideas in public service design', *Public Management Review*, vol.21, no.11, pp.1595–1619.

However, co-design is not done well in the youth sector. This is due to three main reasons.

First, the term 'co-design' is mistakenly used to describe any form of youth participation activity.[5] Second, not much thought is given to access issues and comfortability of young people participating in co-design.[6,7] Finally, co-design is being normalised across the youth sector, yet service providers and the broader system have limited time and resources to invest in such a process and to engage into best practice co-design.[8]

To bring congruency and to ensure that co-design is made into a reality, rather than an ambition of the youth sector, we suggest that:

1. Young people must be provided opportunities for true and authentic co-design that prioritise their expertise, are easily accessible, and allow them to feel safe, comfortable and empowered.

2. Service providers must be upskilled in genuine co-design and encouraged to see broader benefits outside of service