

Practical considerations for engaging youth with lived and/or living experience of substance use as youth advisors and co-researchers

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Introduction

Youth have traditionally been excluded from research given the ethical restrictions in place that are meant to protect them and the rooted assumption that youth have limited agency and expertise to contribute to the research process. When youth voices have been included, they have often been limited as sources of data, which are mainly interpreted by adult researchers. Although participatory action research (YPAR) has been gaining popularity over the last decade, few studies report on how to apply these methods effectively with youth.

Objectives

This presentation will describe how we engaged youth as advisors and research assistants in a qualitative research study, as well as our key learnings and practical considerations for researchers engaging youth with lived and/or living experience of substance use.

Approach/Methods

We applied YPAR methods by partnering with 14 youth from across BC who have lived and/or living experience of substance use to form a project youth advisory to co-design the research protocol and materials. Three advisory members became youth research assistants to facilitate focus groups and qualitative interviews with other youth with lived/living experience and peer support workers who work with youth, and support with data analysis and the dissemination of research findings. Mid- and end-point surveys were distributed to evaluate and improve our youth engagement methods over the course of the study. Study participants who took part in a focus group or interview were also asked to complete a follow-up experience survey.

Results

The positive impact of engaging youth with lived/living experience over the course of the study was reflected by study participant responses to the quality and relevance of the focus group/interview questions and positive experiences with the youth facilitators. Youth partners also described developing new skills in research, group facilitation, leadership, communication, and professionalism. Lessons learned and considerations for engaging youth in substance use research include: an equitable hiring process; proper compensation; communication, transparency, and accountability; safe spaces; flexibility; and youth capacity building.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates varying ways of engaging youth with lived and/or living experience of substance in research and the numerous benefits of YPAR. Engagement not only improved the relevance, quality, and validity of the research, but supported youth capacity building by fostering young people's skills and professional development. This study also demonstrates how YPAR can promote organizational changes to foster more equitable relationships with youth. Lessons learned from this study can be applied by other researchers considering engaging youth with lived/living experience or other marginalized populations.

