

# EXTENDING POWER SHARING INTO EVERYDAY YOUTH WORK AND INTERVENTION PRACTICES

By Jennifer Horton

As a youth work practitioner, I learn something from every young person I work with. Take for example a recent interaction with a young man while waiting in line at McDonalds. During a busy lunch rush, I notice his fervent efforts to access something on his phone and hesitating to place an order. After a short time, I approached the young person and offered to buy him lunch. He explained that the app on his phone had a coupon—buy any sandwich for one dollar—but the Wi-Fi connection was not working. After accepting my offer to buy lunch, he made it clear to me that I did not have to buy his lunch, and insisted that we were going to use the app anyway. The app brought our nine-dollar order down to four dollars—impressive, right? I was thankful to be in the know of how advancements in the tech world can support me in getting my occasional fast food fix for less, but more than that, a young person had given something of himself in sharing that with me. This youth had experienced homelessness; he made an investment into figuring out an app that would allow him to eat on a few dollars, and was sharing this strategy for survival. For the youth I work with who experience homelessness, a meal is sometimes hard to come by and the app was a game changer for what they could afford to eat for the day. By far, the most important thing that youth work has taught me is that everyone benefits when young people are engaged in meaningful ways and are seen as contributors to the world around them.

## EXPLORING A POWER-SHARING MINDSET

Power sharing is an asset-based approach in youth work that embodies mutual respect, a common commitment, and shared responsibility with young people to plan, select, participate, and evaluate youth-specific services and supports. This approach resonates with other efforts to increase youth voice and youth choice through directly aligning decision makers with young people to form a mutually beneficial partnership. Such partnerships include formal youth advisory groups, which serve as steering committees for program development and service delivery, as well as organized youth service-learning projects aimed at civic engagement and community building. The progressive outcomes resulting from these dynamic partnerships demonstrate the endless possibilities of how power sharing can advance our day-to-day youth work. When scaled down, this approach can fit informally within the various roles and relationships youth workers assume with young people. The everyday application of power sharing increases self-determination, strengthens the long-term results of intervention, and leads toward intrinsically motivated youth engagement

Historically, power sharing and intervention have been on opposite ends of the youth engagement spectrum. On the power-sharing end, opportunities for growth and advancement were promoted as the pinnacle of positive youth development; the involvement of young people was looked upon as a form of enrichment for



the young person's development and a way to become a socially contributing member. At the other end of the spectrum, intervention served as a feeble umbrella of support and services to cover basic needs deemed necessary to address problematic issues. This restrictive treatment of the young person prided itself on its efficiency and effectiveness in resolving a social, emotional, or behavioral problem. More recent research suggests that these two ends of the spectrum need to be seen as inseparable goals rather than competing priorities (Pittman, 2003), meaning the full engagement of young people ought to provide opportunities for growth and enrichment coupled with ample support to minimize the adverse impact problematic issues can have on a youth's development.

Merging power sharing and intervention continues to be a work in progress. It appears at times that incorporating both in our youth engagement practices comes at the cost of compromising one or the other. To be truly effective, our intervention work must revolve around self-determination, which is the very core of power sharing. Power sharing focuses on self-determination and recognizes the young people as experts of their lived experience. Who better to partner with than someone who is an expert? The shared work of the intervention allows both the youth and the youth worker to bring their expertise. Allowing intervention work to focus on self-determination through power sharing is both effective in promoting growth and collaboration and efficient in that the work takes place in everyday interactions.

## ELEMENTS OF SELF-DETERMINATION

Self-determination is comprised of three core components: competence, autonomy and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). These specific components can also be distinguished as the *primary colors of youth work*. A set of primary colors is a set of real colors that cannot be produced by mixing other colors. The true colors of youth work: competence, autonomy, and relatedness combine in varying amounts to make up the gamut of the most prevalent practices in youth work today. The practices of positive youth development, trauma-informed care, restorative justice, harm reduction, and motivational interviewing are the vibrant ways we engage in the lives of young people.

The validity and vitality of self-determination across many of our most valued practices is the very heart of youth work. The core components of self-determination are important to explore individually as well as together.

- **Autonomy** is the agency to lead one's own life.
- **Competence** is to be skillful and successful at an activity.
- **Relatedness** is to be interconnected and mutually supported.

Together these components form self-determination that leads to intrinsic motivation.

Power sharing is keeping our finger on the pulse of what makes all of us tick, which is ultimately the intrinsic motivation that results from self-determination. Intrinsic motivation is the human element that allows people to rise above unfavorable and sometimes harsh realities in life. It is also the same force that causes people to push beyond the limitations of what we think is possible, and reach for new heights and possibilities. In youth work, intrinsic motivation is the world we want our young people to live in. A world whose interventions do not minimize or dismiss painful realities at the cost of a young person's dignity, but one that causes us to be present with them as they learn how to thrive despite all that is lacking around them. Our efforts to be present in engaging youth in meaningful ways, and viewing them as necessary contributors to the world around them lead to greater self-determination through power sharing.

## **RISK OF TOKENISM AND EXPLOITATION**

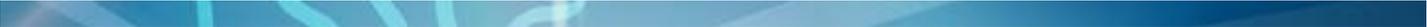
When our practices are void of the primary colors of youth work, there is a counterproductivity and lack of harmony and that paint a bleak picture of excessive control, non-optimal challenges and lack of connectedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The focus of our intervention work can easily shift from being present with young people to being protective of them and their experience of the world. The protective element of intervention work needs to be in growing our own mindfulness of the impact we have on young people when we deny their involvement beyond compliance, especially in regard to decision-making. We waver in our values and commitments to youth when we do not align ourselves through power sharing in our everyday interactions.

When power sharing is not encapsulated by its core values that are rooted in self-determination, the resulting youth engagement runs the risk of landing on either of the extremes of tokenism or exploitive practices. Tokenism results when young people appear to be given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about what they do or how they participate (Hart, 1992). Learning and growth will not occur unless youth hold responsibility along with their actions or involvement; participation without such responsibility becomes tokenism (Konopka, 1973). The exploitive extreme of power sharing is taking advantage of youth involvement in a way that misuses their varying capacities of interpreting the meaning and purpose behind their involvement. This results when we provide young people a specific role or responsibility without being transparent as to what the values or meaning are behind their involvement. Using youth involvement to fit a prescribed role or responsibility—implying the values behind such involvement are for the greater good, when there is a meaning or purpose behind the efforts of involving youth that has not been disclosed—is exploitation. Giving youth voice to share their stories to bring attention to issues that affect young people, but not disclosing to the youth that the telling of their stories is also a way to gain or increase funding, would be an example of exploitation. Even though the veiled purpose may be directly to increase funding, youth that are being exploited are often not compensated for their involvement.

## **ADVANCING TOWARDS A POWER-SHARING MINDSET**

There is a lot to be gained and a lot at stake when we increase the involvement of youth in advancing towards a power-sharing mindset in our everyday interactions. One way of integrating power sharing into our everyday approach and practice of youth work is described as “Step Up and Step Back” (Carmody, n.d.). This approach is illustrated in the earlier example where I engaged a youth in line at McDonalds. I stepped up through acknowledging his apparent need, and made an open-ended offer of support. I also took a step back and acknowledged that he had the ability to choose whether or not to accept my offer, regarding him as capable of figuring out how to best get his needs met apart from my offer or involvement.

If we are not mindful of our internal response to young people, our blind spots can lead us to create a narrative that, “As adults we know better—right?” My lived experience tells me that one can always get a better value and quality of food from the grocery store, which is true. I could further use my knowledge and perception to shame the youth’s poor decision-making and generalize it to all young people who do not know the value of money. However, youths’ lived experience of homelessness may not allow them a place to store food, limiting how much they can possess at a time to what they can carry on themselves.



The assets the youth did have in that moment were a smart phone, access to free Wi-Fi, resources to pay for food, strategic thinking, independence, and the ability to troubleshoot and articulate how my offer was going to be accepted. It was possible for him to afford lunch at McDonald's without my support because of the assets he already possessed. Furthermore, he shared the assets he had with me as much, if not more, than the limited resources I contributed.

The resources I offered were limited by the young person informing me that he did not need me to buy his lunch and that his plan of how to get his needs met was going to stay the same with or without my involvement. In return, I affirmed that he did not need my support, and admired his ability to get his needs met on his own as I learned how to use an app for the first time. It is important to note that I was not owed his story of experiencing homelessness in exchange for my support. This exchange was also not my opportunity to teach a young person the value of a dollar; in fact, it was entirely the other way around. In what could have easily been a missed opportunity for both of us, Step Up, Step Back was useful in promoting a power-sharing mindset and resulted in meaningful engagement with a young person who was also a valuable contributor in our shared experience of standing in line for lunch at McDonalds. Our shared experience brought the additional benefit of connectedness. This example stays true to intervention work, in that our involvement is central to providing resources or support to help meet a basic need of someone experiencing a crisis.

It is important to distinguish that Step Up, Step Back is useful as a starting point in how we approach interventions with youth through power sharing. In contrast to current practices, power sharing does not have to exist just as an attainable end goal. In fact, limiting it only as a desired outcome causes us to miss many opportunities to both benefit from and be impactful in our youth work.

## INTAKES AS AN INTERVENTION

Intakes are another form of intervention work. Intakes are the paperwork process of how we accept young people as eligible members of our programs or systems to gain access to our support, services, and resources for the specific purpose of meeting a need. Let us first agree that nobody likes intake paperwork. To prep our clients, and ourselves we flash a quick smile, offer a warm welcome and take a seat. The cumbersome documentation ensues—in a carefully laid out fashion, we try to make the intake process as painless as possible as we probe and extract a lot of personal information. We have to capture all the necessary information for funding purposes, go over data and privacy information, fill out consent and release forms, review service agreements, fill in any remaining gaps with additional personal details. This experience can result in information overload on both sides. We aim to pack in as much as we can to support the client in making an informed decision, often throwing in arbitrary details that in the moment mean very little to the client. We have a scheduled window in which to accomplish this feat and very little time for small talk. When the efficient and effective intake comes to its inevitable halt, we wave goodbye on our way to our next meeting as the client heads for the door. That experience easily becomes our business-as-usual narrative, when our values and missions tell us otherwise.

If you want to know how young people want to be treated as consumers, go on a college visit. Many involved people take part in that process, from peers to administrative staff. Young people are offered more than a warm hello and a bottle of water. They get a mini orientation to the campus, staff and faculty, and classroom involvement. This process is geared toward the youth making an informed decision. It allows for the necessary information to be received and worked on ahead of time, so that the meeting and in-person interaction can support the young person in determining whether or not this is going to be a good fit. In a

relaxed environment, youth can ask questions and have opportunities for buy-in. The young person is making an investment into something they see will directly benefit them.

For a second, let us wish we could rally around young people and spur them on into their own investment in their futures in this way when we first meet with them.

- **Give a quick tour**—at least point out where the bathrooms are—and make a couple of introductions. Allow people to gain some familiarity with the setting.
- **Send out paperwork ahead of time** for the client fill out before coming in to meet with you, this allows for more in-person time to talk and answer questions. We want to provide clients with a better opportunity to make an informed decision as to whether our program is going to be a good fit for them.
- **Promote buy-in opportunities**, which means participation is voluntary, and is encouraged through the youth being able to recognize that there is a direct benefit not only in the short term but also in some aspect of the long term.
- **Welcome the youth as a new community member** of your program or organization. Self-determination leads to intrinsic motivation. We want young people to show up in their own way, not because they did not have another choice but because the choice was one they made for themselves and identified as a way that they will benefit from being an actively involved participant.

It is fair to say, plain and simple, the luxury of our budgets, job titles, facilities and time constraints may not allow such an orientation to be what greets young people at the door of our support or services. It is also easier to see power sharing being demonstrated in a grandiose context, but important to realize our scaled-down everyday interactions have the same capacity to be impactful in how we approach and engage young people. Let us not be so committed to how necessary our paperwork processes are that we lose sight of the person sitting in front of us. Equally, we cannot compromise the integrity of our process by making it all about each individual person that walks through the door. It is easy to feel pulled between intervention and power sharing as we work to find the most efficient and effective use of our time and resources when it comes to our intake processes. Our youth-work values are what hold the balance; we recognize youth work is about shared responsibility and partnership with young people that allows for self-determination through unconditional involvement.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Whether we are initiating power sharing through an everyday interaction or an intake process there are some common threads that pull through both that will allow us to apply this same approach no matter the setting or situation in which we find ourselves with a young person.

- There needs to be a vehicle—an opportunity that presents itself for us to engage with a young person in a natural setting. Everyday examples are buying lunch at McDonalds, intake meetings, an activity, board game, a cup of coffee. If you do not have a reason to engage a young person, invent one, and welcome the opportunities that come your way.
- There needs to be some form of currency—it is how we find out what is important to a young person; it could also be what the youth is willing to give to participate. Currency can be time, energy, food, recreation, shared work, food, communication, art, food, and any number of things.

- There needs to be trust—trust-building happens in the ordinary mundane part of our day-to-day work. Young people have many variables in their lives; youth workers, because of their regular involvement and how they show up in their interactions, are often the constant that youth can depend on.

Power sharing is a dynamic approach to youth work, especially in intervention work. Youth that are on our radars are there for a reason, often due to a difficult crisis. It is not our role to do them or society a favor and deal with their problems for them. We are not present to lessen the difficulty of making hard decisions. We cannot own their successes, nor can we own their failures. We come fully prepared to engage and be present with young people, trusting their abilities, recognizing their strengths, along with a willingness to work through challenges together, with unconditional involvement and positive regard.

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## ABOUT JENNIFER HORTON

Jennifer has 7 years of experience working with young people, in housing and shelter settings, who have been impacted by homelessness. To her, the best part of her work is being involved in the everyday lives of resilient youth.

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