What builds adolescent capacity in a school setting?

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Background

- Evolved from earlier research examining student successes and positive mental health outcomes

- Findings indicated positive outcomes may arise from a capacity-building environment

Research Objective

To identify capacity building situations and experiences to further understanding of what promotes capacity development in adolescents in an alternative high school setting

Definition

Capacity building (a process):

Something that promotes one's ability, feeling capable, 'stepping up to the plate' - activities that improve one's ability to realize goals

Research Design

- Participatory action research (PAR)
- Team of high school students, staff and university researcher
- Equally shared decision-making process between adolescents and adults

Methods

- Focus groups and interviews
- Data collection was directed by Appreciative Inquiry: a strengths-based philosophy and research method
- Deliberate positive focus – looking for capacity building experiences

Project Results

Answers to our 5 guiding research questions:

1. What does capacity building mean to students and staff?

#1 Quote

"… and if I am feeling good and people got faith in me and I've got faith in myself, I can do anything … and that's what [this school] taught me …"

(student focus group)

Question #2

2. What school experiences have students found to be capacity building?

#2 Quote

"… people recognize that the first time a student gets up [at the school meeting] and talks is a watershed moment … [even] giving a bouquet … that's still something major for the students to do something publicly. And so, that can kinda break the ice for the student and increase their confidence to doing [other] things…"

(staff focus group)

Question #3

3. What student-teacher relationships promote capacity building?

#3 Quote

"[A teacher] really helped me discover what exactly my talent is … I suppose I do what I do now [in my worklife] because of … having that talent realized in the beginning …"

(student alumni focus group)

Question #4

4. What role does a school democratic process play in student capacity building?

#4 Quote

"It's confidence [building] with the Chair [position], at [the school's weekly meeting] … it was really nerve racking 'cause I don't know these people very well and, but you just do it and kinda break that boundary … I was like 'I can do it, I'll do it again'!"

(focus group student)

Question #5

5. What strategies do students and staff feel would be effective in promoting student capacity?

#5 Quote

"… you just have to sort of underscore that this is **THEIR** community. That school belongs to those kids … It's real. It's not being said to make them happy or to try to get them to behave in a certain way – it's real … and it's a collaboration between everybody there."

(parent focus group)

Major Theme

Supportive healthy relationships were found to be one of the most important factors in student capacity building

Summary of Key Themes: Capacity-building environments

- Caring
- Challenges & risk taking
- Safety & security
- Non-judgmental environment
- Unconditional acceptance
- Student engagement in issues

- Shared power
- Freedom with responsibility
- Success
- Maturing experiences
- Adulthood preparation
- Mentoring
- Critical thinking

Conclusions

Once the environment is set up for student involvement, support and safety to speak – students obtain adult experiences of voice, of capacity building and emotional growth

Conclusions cont'd

The research found that when students' voices were nurtured and they participated in important school decision-making processes, a sense of confidence and capability was promoted. The sustainability of capacity-building outcomes for students was evident in alumni focus group discussions of long-term positive effects on their careers, family lives and even child rearing practices.

Summary Quote

"[Students] find … such a positive atmosphere and that everybody appreciates and celebrates their successes, that they become really confident and competent, academically as well, that they didn't think was possible …"

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(staff focus group)

Q & A

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