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A method to give voice to young people with experience of mental ill-health
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Abstract

Mental illness has increased among young people, and mental issues have broad negative impact on young people's well-being, health and education. Therefore, a positive learning environment in school might be the most effective intervention to promote mental health. As young people are considered experts on their own everyday experiences, it is vital to give voice to young people and involving them in research concerning their health.

The aim was to explore the use of art exercises within focus groups to understand how mental health can be promoted from young people's perspectives.

14 Scottish and Swedish young people aged 15-21 participated in four focus groups (FG). The overall question was how schools promote mental health and have a role in supporting early intervention in young people with mental health problems. In order to capture their experiences they received two assignments; Dream exercise - What does a 'mentally healthy' school look like? and Heart exercise - what should be the values, ethos, culture, 'feeling' of a mentally healthy school? Using colored pens the young people were encouraged to disclose their experiences while they were drawing.

The young people voiced their dream scenario of a 'mentally health' school via words and sentences e.g. acceptance; non-judgmental support from teachers; have someone to talk to. The heart exercise encouraged the young people to formulate values anticipated in such a school, e.g. access to support; be treated as an equal; feel respected. When the FG ended, the young people expressed gratitude that adults had listened to them.

The exercises in FG gave the young people an opportunity to share their life experiences and voice their opinions. In combination with drawing pictures together, they narrated about negative experiences and lack of support and their views on how school can promote mental health.

1) value and appreciate young people's perspective 2) reflect on the use of art exercises as a means to broaden FG discussion 3) recognize how the method in itself can increase confidence speaking about mental health

