

INTERVIEW. Reading time: 3 min

Lourdes Cantarero Arevalo

Youth advocates in children and adolescent health: “if you want to see diversity in youth representation, you have to be ready to support it and be able to create safe and trustworthy spaces for all”.

Bea Albermann and Gabby Mathews, combine their last-year of medical studies with multiple advocacy actions so that the voices of children and adolescents are heard, respected and included in shaping youth-sensitive healthcare services and in tackling the climate crisis.



Gabby Mathews is in her last year of medical studies at Imperial College London. Through her experience as a patient, she is a children and young people’s advocate within the NHS and beyond. She currently sits on two boards at NHS England, the board of the REAL centre at the Health Foundation and works regularly with government.

Bea Albermann is a medical student in her final year in Switzerland at the university of Zurich. She is the former Swiss youth delegate to the WHO and former president of the Swiss Medical Students Association. Her focus and advocacy work lies now on planetary health.

- ***Youth voices have to be heard. Why and who should hear these voices?***

“there are several excellent reasons why we should include youth into research and policymaking: On the one hand there is the ethical side and legal component defined by the UN convention on the Rights of the Child, but most importantly, youth is and will be the most and longest affected by every decision taken today. Young people are experts by experience and their opinion is as valid as any other expert’s opinion. Engaging youth means improving science – it’s a mutual benefit. Having more research that quantifies this benefit and elaborates on the ways of meaningfully engaging youth is one important step in this process.”

“Talking about youth engagement, I do not only mean giving young patients a voice within the health sector, I also refer to the system that impacts our health outside of the hospital: how we design structures that help children and adolescents grow healthy and thrive, that allow them to grow up in a healthy way. In order to do so, children and young people are an essential part of the co-creation of such a system, of new structures.”

- ***How do we make sure that the structure makes space for children and adolescent being “policymakers”? How do we make it happen?***

“The power of co-creation is that adults are able to bring the experience and the skills needed to develop policy. It should be a rigorous process, but young people’s experiences and preferences should be heard and considered when developing the policy. I don’t think it necessarily needs to be a survey among children or young people, but a continuous process of going to, asking and consult them. There are so many opportunities to interact with young people whether by social media or methods that are more traditional, but just engaging is not enough. Child and youth inclusion should be mainstreamed.

Another important factor is to increasing access and understanding. We gatekeep many of our structures. For example, the language that we use, the meeting spaces we propose or even financial barriers. It takes years of medical school and training for doctors to be able to understand many of the medical terms we use. However, true intelligence is being able able to transform something that has taken seven years to learn and describe it in 10 seconds”.

- ***So we should start by being good listeners and meeting young people in their own spaces.***

“Yes, for example at an assembly at a school near you or meeting the children where they choose to spend their free time.”

- ***How can we make sure that we can hear all voices? That there is diversity in children and young people representation?***

“I think one problem is the way youth representation is currently being implemented. For example, having one youth delegate per board, just one seat at the table, is not enough. We need to talk about how these meeting tables are shaped and who has access to them. In Switzerland, the youth climate movement is quite aware of diversity and always organizes diverse speakers for the movement, but it shouldn’t be the sole job of young people to aim for diversity around the table. It is mainly the role of those with decision making power, the ones organizing meetings, committees, boards, panels to take the time and ask themselves: Which voices are yet unheard? What barriers exist?”

“If you want to hear the voice of vulnerable youth, you should not expect that young people come to your space, unless you can ensure you create a safe, trustworthy and supportive space for them. If you want to see diversity, you need to be ready to support it. Another barrier to diverse participation are the additional demands we place on young people, to not just share their personal stories but also to take time out of school. We often disregard the time of young people but they maybe caring for family members or even hold an extra job. The requirements for a strong internet connection or even to dress smartly are further limiters. We also need to consider the role of nurturing trust, if every week you visited a primary school to speak to children you would undoubtedly develop a relationship with them and learn about what matters to them. As such, when you have a specific question to influence a specific policy area, and they would already know you, when the opportunity for participation occurs”.

Are adults and public health professionals going to the places where children and adolescents are? Do we meet them where they are?

“There is no one-way to engage with children and young people, so whilst it is often appropriate to do that, in other scenarios it would not be. Within the NHS, there are a lot of hospital youth forums which are able to hugely influence their organisations. Looking back at work we did in the development of the NHS Long Term Plan, we commissioned specific research in areas of England, which have been poorly engaged with in the past. For example in Northeast England we were able to fund lunches and access to a recreational space for young people to enjoy and while they were there, social researchers were able to join them in activities and in conversations that directly feedback to the policy cycle”.

“Thinking about spaces for such intergenerational dialogue, I think we can once again learn from the communication within the climate justice movement. For every meeting, we try to create a safe space for everyone: we do check-ins we do checkouts. We ensure that everyone has a say, that everyone can feel safe in this space and share his or her vulnerabilities. We take time to reflect on decision-making processes, diversity, representation, and existing power structures. Adults’ organizations could learn from youth movements regarding this”.

- So you are proposing to bring vulnerability to high level discussion were not only the youth but also adults share beyond their titles and backgrounds and expertise?

“Absolutely! Since summer of 2020, I have had the pleasure of being part of a group of leaders exploring about kindness in healthcare. Opening this topic up to discussion at the BMJ International Forums has emphasised to me how easily we define others and ourselves by their roles and titles. However, young people are not able to introduce themselves with a title. They are simply experts by experience in their lives. As such, they bring their whole selves to conversations in a way that professionals often cannot do. 'So yes, I would absolutely welcome empowering adults to share other aspects of themselves beyond the confines of their titles or roles”