Reflections on the Opportunities and Challenges of Youth Engagement: Youth and Professional Perspectives

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ABSTRACT   This paper documents the opportunities and challenges experienced by youth leaders and community agency partners in our community-based research project on youth engagement. Participants provided reflective statements, based on their experiences during the course of this multi-year project. Specifically, these insights focused on (a) *youth-oriented and collaborative research processes* (for example highlighting youth voice—"bottom-up process for youth by youth," and co-learning and team work); (b) *group dynamics* (for example, common purpose, dealing with transformation, relationship and trust-building, and power issues); and (c) *benefits for community youth-serving agencies and youth themselves*, for example, capacity-building, grounded in youth experiences through participatory research, and knowledge translation and practical application—advancing research into action). The process of being involved in this research was coined an "amazing journey" to facilitate positive change and transformation within the youth and community partners. Understanding such youth engagement issues has implications for better supporting high-risk youth and their families in order to enhance the quality of their lives in a meaningful, sustainable way.

KEYWORDS   high-risk youth, youth leadership, empowerment, social justice, quality of life

Introduction

Engaging youth with "high-risk" conditions, such as poverty, homelessness, abusive and addictive behaviours, school dropout, and mental health issues, presents a significant challenge (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Caine & Boydell, 2010; Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009). Those "high-risk" youths are often disconnected from the society and they typically distrust the existing support systems (Curran, Bowness, & Comack, 2010; Wearing, 2011). A youth-centred approach is needed to build a positive, meaningful relationship with youth, through respectfully working with and engaging youth in a youth-friendly way (Alicea, Pardo, Conover, Gopalan, & McKay, 2012; Davidson, Wien, & Anderson, 2010; Lind, 2008; Lynam & Cowley, 2007; Yohalem & Martin, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to report the key reflective learnings from our ongoing community-based research project that aims to examine the essential factors

for effective and meaningful youth engagement. In particular, the paper documents both opportunities and challenges of engaging youth with high-risk conditions. The paper describes our community-based research to more effectively engage high-risk youth and produce more positive youth outcomes. Understanding such youth engagement issues has implications for better supporting high-risk youth and their families in order to enhance the quality of their lives in a meaningful, sustainable way. That is, this paper addresses quality-of-life issues within the context of engaging and working with high-risk youth that has implications for creating sustainable futures for those youth and their families.

One innovative and unique aspect of our community-based research is the use of a youth-guided and youth-informed approach to youth engagement. We have integrated youth leadership into our research, while working with community agency partners. The paper begins with a project overview before describing a literature-guided conceptual foundation. Then, our paper documents the voices and reflective statements of youth leaders and community agency partners on opportunities and challenges of youth engagement from youth and professional perspectives.

Overview of Youth Engagement Project

Our ongoing community-based research project, which started in fall 2011, uses a grass-roots, youth-guided, and strengths-oriented approach to the engagement and development of high-risk, marginalized youth who face a multitude of life challenges. This project is contextualized within the prevalence of poverty and homelessness, racism and discrimination, stigma and mental health issues, school dropout and abusive/addictive behaviours, social exclusion, and/or compromised developmental outcomes (Alicea et al., 2012; Fogel, 2004; Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Pearrow, 2008). This homegrown project emerged from networks and dialogues with a number of government (municipal and provincial) and non-profit (youth and multicultural) agencies and university departments (extension, social work, human ecology, public health) in a western Canadian city.

Importantly, this is a youth-driven and youth-oriented project, guided by a diverse group of talented youth leaders, in working with interdisciplinary and cross-sectorial agency and university partners and broader youth participants. Our female and male youth leaders aged 16 to 24 include Aboriginal and immigrant leaders recruited by our community agency partners that provide local youth programs. We have in this age category twelve participants. All leaders possess excellent interpersonal, communication, and leadership skills and are well connected to local youth culture. Our youth leaders collectively identified our team name, "Youth4YEG" (YEG stands for the city's airport code), along with a creative team logo. Throughout, the key questions being addressed include: (a) how can we best engage youth? (b) how can we more effectively facilitate the optimal development of youth? and (c) how can we better support youth to become more engaged, successful citizens in our community?

The overall focus of our research is on honouring/highlighting youth's voice and mobilizing youth into actions for social change, specifically, the improvement of support systems (policy & practice) and environments (neighbourhoods, schools, & communities). Youth engagement is a central concept/process throughout the project to achieve the research goal. Consequently, improved support and environment for youth is expected to lead to an enhanced quality of life for them and their families, while respectfully working with and engaging youth proves key in facilitating this process.

Our youth leaders have met over 150 times since October 2012. These meetings are youth-oriented, including youth-led ice-breaker activities, small working-group sessions, and all-inclusive dialogues (for example, talking circles). These sessions are designed to critically address the key factors of youth engagement. For example, small working-group sessions included arts-based activities using creativity and imagination to illustrate their visions of meaningful youth engagement, while talking circles involved the identification of and dialogue on key concepts of youth engagement such as relationship- and capacity-building. One major outcome was the youth-informed development of a framework of youth engagement, which has already been reported elsewhere (Iwasaki, Springett, Dashora, McLaughlin, McHugh, & Youth4YEG Team, 2014). To plan for meetings, youth leaders took turns to attend planning meetings and set an agenda. In between meetings, youth leaders were assigned to complete homework such as researching approaches used by local community agencies and preparing to contribute to a session by responding to specific youth-engagement questions determined at a previous meeting. Once the framework of youth engagement was developed, youth leaders facilitated a series of engagement sessions with high-risk youth recruited locally. The learnings from this pilot framework-testing study have guided the planning and execution of the next phase of this research program including the hosting of a youth conference and the building of a youth-ally coalition to mobilize our collective actions for social change.

Literature-Guided Conceptual Foundation

Although our youth leader talents, experiences, and expertise guide our research, our team is cognizant of and informed by the literature on youth engagement and development. In particular, a youth-oriented approach to social change is called for in community-university partnerships (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Caine & Boydell, 2010; Curran et al., 2010; Wearing, 2011). Its primary aim is to effectively support high-risk, marginalized youth, by emphasizing youth engagement and development (Ersing, 2009; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). Importantly, meaningful youth engagement is a key concept for both positive youth development (PYD; Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Lind, 2008; Lynam & Cowley, 2007) and social justice youth development (SJYD; Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright, & James, 2002; Ross, 2011) to facilitate a systems change/social change to effectively support "high-risk" youth and families (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009;

Davidson et al., 2010; Wexler et al., 2009: Yohalem & Martin, 2007). Consequently, a blend of both positive youth development and social justice youth development provides a literature-guided conceptual foundation for our research, as supported by Ross's (2011) case study by a youth-adult partnership—the Healthy Options for Prevention and Education (HOPE) Coalition.

First, positive youth development seeks to promote diverse developmental competencies that young people need at individual, social, and system levels to become productive, contributing members of society (Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008). Rather than a deficit focus, PYD adopts a holistic view of individual development, giving attention to youth's physical, personal, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development, and emphasizes the strengths, resources, and potentials of youth (Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008).

Second, social justice youth development involves youth's awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity, and the engagement in social justice activities that counter oppressive conditions (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright, & James, 2002; Ross, 2011). Social justice youth development is theorized to involve the three levels of Self, Community, and Global awareness that expand youth consciousness to higher levels of social criticality and human compassion through social justice in youth development (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011). Specifically, SJYD involves a critical analysis of social, economic, and political factors including race, gender, and culture, and addresses the systemic root causes of community problems (Suleiman, Soleimanpour, & London, 2006; Wilson et al., 2006). SJYD is explicitly concerned with transforming community conditions, such as inequitable power relations and conditions that are oppressive to youth and families (Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011).

Reflective Voices of Youth Leaders and Community Agency Partners
This main part of our paper documents the opportunities and challenges experienced by seven of our youth leaders and thirteen community agency partners. To protect confidentiality and anonymity, we refer to these individuals as youth leaders (YL) or agency partners (AP). They provided reflective statements in the spring and summer of 2014, based on their experiences of this multi-year project that started in fall 2011. These included personal written statements, as well as team meeting minutes, in order to highlight the participants' insights/voices on both the research processes and outcomes/impacts. These written statements were compiled and coded to perform content analysis in order to identify the key themes and sub-themes, each of which is supported by specific quotes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). In particular, "direct quotes" importantly describe and support the themes/sub-themes. This "bottom-up" or "people-up" approach is an original, unique element of our research, as opposed to a "top-down" or "academic researcher-down" approach.

Specifically, personal reflective insights focused on describing three major areas: (a) youth-oriented and collaborative research processes; (b) group dynamics; and (c) benefits for community youth-serving agencies and youth themselves.

Youth-Oriented and Collaborative Research Processes

A unique aspect of our research project is that this is youth-oriented and collaborative, guided by the talents and lived experiences of youth leaders. The sub-themes in this broad theme include: (a) highlighting youth voice: "bottom-up process for youth by youth"; (b) co-learning and team work; (c) being flexible and adaptable and strengths-based; and (d) creating a safe, comfortable, and fun space.

Highlighting Youth Voice: "Bottom-up Process for Youth by Youth"

Specifically, this project honours youth voice using a bottom-up process for youth by youth: "I am proud to share that this project is for youth by youth. This bottom-up process gives youth a voice that they normally don't get" (Youth Leader One). Our youth leaders noted that co-creating a framework for youth engagement was a youth-guided "rewarding" (Youth Leader One) experience:

> Creating the youth engagement framework! We worked well as a team to build the framework. There was a key purpose for the bi-weekly meetings. We all had chance to input our ideas of youth engagement and what factors it entails. We gained insights from many perspectives and fellow youth leaders' personal experiences. (Youth Leader Two)

Importantly, this framework development process was guided by "nothing but our own life experiences" (Youth Leader One). Through co-creating the framework, youth leaders worked towards building a positive relationship in a "comfortable" space to speak up and share ideas:

> As a group at the end I felt that we did a great job building our relationship, while also building our framework. I felt comfortable each and every session, and was glad that I was given a non-judgmental environment where I could speak up and share my ideas, while also learning from those around me. (Youth Leader Three)

Co-Learning and Team Work

As suggested in the last quote, learning from each other (co-learning) was a main attraction for youth leaders' gatherings: "This project was very unique in that it attracted both people that have learned about marginalization and 'high-risk' lifestyles as well as people that have lived it. This brought with it an incredible diversity and opportunity for co-learning" (Youth Leader Four). This youth leader further elaborated: "Learning so much from one another through the process. It is a very unique experience to create a tangible document of [youth engagement] framework 'from scratch.' It truly shows determination and effective team work" (Youth Leader

Four). Another youth leader concurred: "My experience with the research project has been one that is interesting filled with great learning experiences, which I could take with me for many years to come" (Youth Leader Three). Inspired by the desire to bring about positive community change, learning from peer youth leaders and participants was highlighted by another youth leader:

> I chose to be a part of this research group because I saw a potential to be involved in something that will bring about a positive change to my community. I also was enthused by the opportunity to learn from and engage with other youth in my community whom I may not be able to associate with on my own. Over the past year and several months of partaking in the group, I have learned so much from the youth participants and my peers. (Youth Leader Five)

This process involved learning about the opportunities and challenges of collaboration: "Overall, I have been so grateful to be part of such a unique project. I learned a lot about the benefits and challenges of working collaboratively and got to meet so many interesting folks along the way. I will take this experience with me in whatever work I continue to do" (Youth Leader Six). Despite the diversity within the youth leaders' group, they shared a common interest in youth engagement and leadership: "I enjoyed meeting likeminded youth that were interested in leadership, working with youth, and making the community a better place" (Youth Leader Seven). Another youth leader further elaborated her passion and learning:

> We embodied our framework, and for that reason, I really enjoyed doing my job and knew that I was doing something that I was passionate about. I began this when I was 15 years old, and later this year I will turn 18. It has been the greatest working experience I could ask for, and I learnt so much from my fellow youths. I have learnt the importance of communication and hard work, and the importance of helping those around me. (Youth Leader Three)

Being Flexible, Adaptable and Strengths-Based

After many weeks and hours of co-creating a framework for youth engagement, youth leaders pilot-tested the framework by facilitating a series of youth engagement sessions. Despite the difficulty of recruiting "high-risk" youth participants, they were able to adjust and be flexible to address practical challenges:

> Soon after, we started the engagement sessions with youth. We had a difficult time getting the youth to come, which in a sense was expected since we wanted to engage youth that were not engaged. We have learned to be flexible and adjust things as we go and I believe this gave the research the practical experience that we would have never foreseen. (Youth Leader One)

Another youth leader spoke further about the importance of being flexible

and patient:

> I learned that when working with high-risk, marginalized youth, one must be flexible. Communication is the key. Youth need trust in order to open up and the time it takes to build that trust may vary. Structure is important to an extent in order to garner data and results. (Youth Leader Seven)

Effective youth engagement required flexibility, patience, and respectful communications for trustful relationships that can be neither assumed nor created in a day or a week.

Another related process was a strengths-based approach. In fact, the project started with getting to know youth leader talents and strengths "through icebreaker activities and through learning from each other's life experiences. We realized the talents that each one possessed and how they could be important in understanding how to engage youth" (Youth Leader One). Later on, during a pilot-test of our framework, we purposefully relied on "youth leaders' strengths to suggest potential activities to do with youth participants" (Youth Leader Two). Accordingly, we facilitated a series of activities such as ice-breakers and art-based activities at engagement sessions with youth.

Creating a Safe, Comfortable, and Fun Space

To make the research process youth-oriented and friendly, creating a safe, comfortable, and fun space was identified as essential to "build bonds":

> We always keep communication and safety a priority and we consistently work at creating a safe and fun space for everyone and making sure everyone feels heard through the process. The fact that we had familiar faces come back every other week was very encouraging. We began to build bonds with one another, especially in the last year, making the space comfortable and fun. (Youth Leader Four)

Another youth leader concurred: "I liked that the youth that came to the sessions had a safe, positive environment to get together with other youth and have fun. The youth that came did seem to enjoy their time there" (Youth Leader Seven).

It is important to note that "check-ins and check-outs" (Youth Leader Two) were identified as a key process for making the sessions constructive and meaningful. We always started with *check-in* to get to know where each participant is at and get them oriented to each session, and ended with *check-out* to share feedback such as things they liked and areas for improvement to more effectively engage youth, and conclude each session in a positive, encouraging way:

> I feel like check-ins and check-outs should remain a key element of our meetings. As one of the agency members mentioned at the agency meeting, everything in between check-in and check-out can be chaotic but keeping a consistent welcome

and closure is important. (Youth Leader Four)

This youth agency partner shared that "everything in between can be chaos but it is crucial to have the check-in and check-out structure to help the experience be contained and create safety."

Group Dynamics

Another major theme involves opportunities and challenges concerning group dynamics that include sub-themes of: (a) common purpose; (b) dealing with transformation; (c) relationship and trust-building; (d) diversity, size, and commitment of youth group; (e) power issues; and (f) structural barriers.

Common Purpose

Youth leaders recognized one key factor in group dynamics: having a common purpose despite group diversity. One youth leader spoke about a shared "desire to change the status quo": "We were complete strangers, had diverse life experiences but shared a common definition of youth. In addition, we shared a desire to change the status quo on how youth were being engaged with various organizations" (Youth Leader One). Another youth leader supported a common purpose to create "more and better opportunities for marginalized youth": "I feel that our group worked well together in the sense that we were all there for similar reasons. Each of us had an interest in getting involved in creating more and better opportunities for marginalized youth" (Youth Leader Four).

Dealing with Transformation

Another key factor that worked well in the youth leaders' group was the way they dealt with group change during this multi-year project:

> We handled the comings and goings as well at the transformation of the group quite well. For those of us that have decided to stay until this point, we were forced to adapt and adjust to some people only being partially committed and to some having to leave altogether. I felt that although it was disappointing when a key member had to leave, we all seemed genuinely supportive of that person's situation and choice. (Youth Leader Four)

By contrast, the challenges of maintaining our youth-oriented, collaborative research process were voiced by a number of youth leaders.

Relationship and Trust-Building

First, building a trustful, positive relationship with youth was a major challenge in itself. One youth leader cautioned about "asking for answers from youth prematurely":

Despite our plan to execute activities with the youth, our meetings took a bit of

> a turn and we found ourselves not just hanging out and observing but searching for answers by asking the youth that attended very directly what they thought or experienced about certain issues. I found the session when we asked the youth directly about their thoughts on homelessness to be problematic because I felt as though it was too soon and too intrusive. We had not yet created, in my opinion, a solid enough relationship with the youth for them to feel comfortable responding. I find that this will not provide us with authentic answers and defeats the purpose of 'youth-led research' if topics are being pressured onto them. (Youth Leader Four)

Despite our intention to value youth voices, asking sensitive questions about poverty and homelessness in their lives was seen as too intrusive "without gaining their trust first" (Youth Leader Two). Although we wanted to provide youth-oriented opportunities to give voices to youth participants, it did not seem well received by both youth leaders and participants:

> There was so much concern with being careful about the types of questions that are 'acceptable' to ask the youth participants regarding their personal experiences with poverty, homelessness, etc. I wish we were more creative in finding ways to get certain conversations started, which would give us some insight to each other's experiences and possible solutions… . I liked that many of the youth participants who came to the meetings were consistent in attendance and they seemed to enjoy the gatherings. I see this as some sort of achievement on our end. (Youth Leader Five)

This youth leader was insightful in thinking of a more effective and creative approach to engaging youth in conversations, while admitting "some achievement" showed by consistent attendance by many youth participants. Another youth leader indicated that although "our group started out idealistically agreeing to make collaborative and consensus-based decisions, in reality, there is a lot of trust, time and energy that must go into that process" (Youth Leader Six).

Under the broad theme of relationship/trust-building, it was encouraging to see the youth leaders' observation that we strove to make our relationship positive through, for example, the use of "debrief" within the youth leaders' group. It was noted that "we became good at debriefing and honestly voicing our thoughts and feelings. I appreciated how we were able to do this quite well near the end. It was very helpful" (Youth Leader Four). The same youth leader spoke of the importance of inclusivity: "Assuring space for everyone was something we worked at continuously. It became important to allow everyone space to speak by not cutting the speaker off, giving a person time to respond, and listening to what was being shared" (Youth Leader Four).

Diversity, Size, and Commitment of Youth Group

As noted earlier, our research project values diversity within the youth population. Specifically, a comment was made within the context of group dynamics:

One of the major learnings from this research project has been from the internal group structure, makeup, and dynamics and its shifts throughout the past year and a half. When I first joined this project, I was excited to see the diversity in the room, the variety of youth present, and the multitude of lived experience represented. This truly was a major strength of the project (Youth Leader Six).

Another comment elaborates the complexity of the internal group structure:

Creating the framework with about 17 youth who were at different stages in their lives and had diverse life experiences was interesting and frustrating yet rewarding. The discussions always went in circles and it became a routine for us to take the whole meeting. However, as we started to see the framework come to life, we appreciated the process and saw utility in having gone in circles because that is how youth in general were going to understand it. The project started to make sense but we also started to lose some of the youth leaders due to life changes. The group lost some of its diversity that made it unique especially in a university setting. This mishap made the group draw closer to each other and it made the discussions go much smoother because everyone would have a chance to speak and be heard in the discussions. (Youth Leader One)

Gradual reduction of the size of the youth leaders' group brought unforeseen benefits: "With fewer youth leaders provided more ease of getting to know each other better over the weeks. More youth leaders' voices were being heard in a smaller group. Group work was more efficient" (Youth Leader Two). Another youth leader spoke of the benefit of having a "more committed" youth group to co-create a youth engagement framework:

In the beginning, it was very difficult to feel like we could get any work done or have our voice heard because there were so many people. This made the process quite slow and at times seemingly ineffective. As time went on, the group got much smaller. By September 2013 there was a fairly consistent 16 members or so that would come regularly to meetings. Although losing some key members who, I felt, provided a lot of good insights and experiences was difficult, the smaller, more committed group made it much easier to move forward. We started to agree upon what we felt the basis, the philosophy, and the outcome of this framework should be. We narrowed down our targeted demographic and decided upon wording we were comfortable with. Finally, in November or December 2013, we had a skeleton framework that most of us seemed pleased with. (Youth Leader Four)

However, the challenging life situations of youth seem to make it very difficult to fully commit to such a labour-intensive research project as ours:

Whether that be in numbers, people's ability to commit fully, or the time in between meetings, this made it quite difficult to move forward. Though this was

a paid project, I think, most, if not all, of us could not depend on this job alone to support us financially. Because of this, our full-time work would take precedence at times, making it difficult to be 100% committed to every meeting. (Youth Leader Four)

Power Issues

Another significant factor for youth leaders concerned power issues. Our project's focus on power sharing with youth was greatly appreciated and ensured its innovation and uniqueness:

In the agency sharing meetings, I appreciated the youth workers/professionals admitting that they often have a hard time giving youth the power to run the programs that include them. This formalized what we were doing and finally made sense why it was an unique research project. (Youth Leader Four)

However, this type of a funded research project created other power issues, one of which concerned relationships with granting agencies. A youth leader voiced that "details about funding were unclear; there was not always enough transparency for the youth leaders. Power dynamics seemed to limit our voices in some circumstances" (Youth Leader Two). In this manner, "transparency" was identified as an important factor in making the process respectful and equally engaging for youth in order to build positive relationships. Accordingly, we must be more critical and conscious about whether this research project is indeed "youth-led/youth-guided":

A major frustration I faced over the last year and a half was the presumption of this project as being a youth-led, youth-guided initiative. I do believe in the last few months we have begun to address this, but the challenges are something to acknowledge. I believe phase two of this project can start fresh with the learnings from phase one (this past year and a half). For a large part of the project, I believe the project was largely dictated by funding needs and to some extent the project-lead. Although I can understand limited funding and financial strains impact choice and options, we should not have been told that we had an agency to make decisions about topics outside of our control. (Youth Leader Six)

Despite our conscious efforts to make the process youth-guided, the complex power issues related to funders' needs and academic researchers' positions and roles became major challenges even unconsciously. The same youth leader voiced her uneasiness in critiquing and also suggested means of respectfully engaging youth:

I believe it took our group a while to feel comfortable expressing dissent and sharing opinions. This led to the youth leaders (myself included) not feeling like they could challenge or critique the course of the project. I believe this was in part due to the lack of a clear process and understanding of the project. It was many months into the project before everyone fully understood what we were taking

on. Putting more time and energy into determining an inclusive decision-making process may have helped mitigate some of these frustrations. (Youth Leader Six)

Structural Barriers

Importantly, these power issues are connected closely to structural barriers. Our project underlined structural factors that might exclude many disadvantaged youth from continuing involvement:

> As the project moved forward, the group lost a few youth leaders who brought important perspectives. This project once again perpetuated the same structural problems in society. Many youth leaders who would have liked to stay involved were unable to, because of life situations, unstable homes, jobs and financial challenges. Again, this shows that not everyone has the same access to having a voice and being heard, regardless of the desire to participate. This is not something that can be easily fixed but is important to note. (Youth Leader Six)

This youth leader's observation about unequal access and structural barriers "regardless of the desire" is worth emphasizing.

Benefits for Community Youth-Serving Agencies and Youth Themselves

While working closely with the youth leaders, our project has involved partnerships with local and provincial youth-serving agencies. These community partners described benefits from this research: (a) capacity-building; (b) inspirational, meaningful youth engagement at a positive, safe, and responsive space; (c) grounding in youth experiences through participatory research; (d) knowledge translation and practical application—advancing research into action; (e) demonstration of positive youth outcomes; (f) collaborative and coordinated processes in an iterative and evolving way; (g) activating the voice of youth, relationship-building with youth, and social change; and (h) an "amazing journey."

Capacity-Building

One agency partner appreciated capacity building for both youth-serving agencies and youth:

> As we work with youth both in our after-school program sites and as teen mentors, being part of this project has provided us with valuable insights and information on the youth in our community and how we can work with them more effectively. The youth from our organization who have been involved in this project have stated that they are very pleased to be a part of it and really feel that their voices are being heard. It has added to their confidence and to date several of the participants have gone on to speak out and advocate at all government levels—municipal, provincial, and federal—for all marginalized youth. Being a part of this project has really given them confidence and skills that will serve them well throughout their

lives and offers the hope that they need right now to feel successful and inspired to make a difference for themselves and others. (Agency Partner One)

Another partner from a provincial government agency admitted these benefits:

> Our diverse, respectful partnership provides a mutually beneficial space and opportunity for co-learning and mutual capacity building and for co-creating ideas and approaches to our research. I strongly believe that this research has the potential of making a real difference in better supporting our youth, by mobilizing youth's voices and talents into actions for changes, especially for youth who live in marginalized conditions (e.g., poverty) including Aboriginal, immigrant, and refugee youth. (Agency Partner Two)

Particularly recognized was the role of this research in building capacity of agencies on effective youth engagement: "Continued exploration of the framework builds capacity for more agencies to understand how to engage youth more effectively" (Agency Partner Three). A partner from a public school board agreed: "This project enables professional learning, community engagement, and capacity-building among stakeholders in our educational community, contributing to the process of making a real difference for our youth and families in our community" (Agency Partner Four). Another partner from a community-wide agency dedicated to ending homelessness acknowledged, "The project is directly relevant to our current work enhancing community capacity to address the needs of homeless and at-risk youth in our city" (Agency Partner Five).

Also, this project's contributions reached an immigrant-serving agency: "This research deepens our understanding of the complex web of factors that impact the lives of marginalized youth, and also illuminates some of the unique barriers to inclusion that are faced by those who are newcomers" (Agency Partner Six). Further, a community funding agency spoke about learning to improve youth outcomes:

> We work with numerous partners in order to address complex community issues, and our numerous investments support organizations and initiatives delivering a broad spectrum of services to vulnerable individuals and families. As an organization committed to reducing poverty in this region, it is imperative that we understand the challenges experienced by marginalized youth in achieving important milestones, like high-school completion, as a foundation for significantly improved outcomes in their future. The results from this project enable all of us to learn from marginalized youth and allow us the opportunity to implement our findings and improve outcomes for youth in years to come. (Agency Partner Seven)

More tangibly, another community agency partner suggested "a youth council" for organizations, guided by the project learnings: "The framework and format that this project has initiated could be a good starting point towards having a youth council at

many organizations in order to maintain the youth-led perspective. Maybe our youth can be a part of this?" (Agency Partner Eight).

Inspirational, Meaningful Youth Engagement at a Positive, Safe, and Responsive Space
Community agency partners witnessing the youth-informed research process were impressed with the positive, safe, and responsive space for meaningful and inspirational engagement with high-risk youth. The principal from a local charter school commented:

> Our students began attending the Youth4YEG engagement sessions in February 2014. In the weeks since their first experience, I have personally observed (through my own support in ensuring students are informed and have access to the program) an opportunity for meaningful engagement and agency that supports young people who have experienced challenging circumstances in their lives. Youth4YEG offers young people who would otherwise not have access to a positive space, a place to explore their own interests free from drugs, alcohol or violence. (Agency Partner Three)

An executive director of a community youth-serving agency pointed out the importance of providing "a space for dialogue" to explore issues integral to youth's lives:

> The opportunity for them [youth] to further explore an issue that would initially appear beyond their influence, yet integral to many of their daily experiences, is encouraging. This project opens a space for dialogue for youth to express their needs in a safe and responsive environment and hopefully impact policy change. (Agency Partner Nine)

Another director of a community organization emphasized the "integrity" of our research "in a community climate that is experiencing ever increasing needs for youth engagement opportunities" (Agency Partner Ten).

Grounding in Youth Experiences through Participatory Research
Our community agency partners acknowledged the significant role of our participatory research being "grounded" within the youth experiences:

> Effectively and equitably engaging high-risk and marginalized youth within society can be a significant challenge, yet is crucial for the positive development and integration into society. The PI and his team of youth leaders have begun to address this challenge through their process of creating a youth engagement framework that is grounded in the experiences of youth themselves. (Agency Partner Eight)

Another agency partner stressed implications for change at multiple levels:
This participatory way of work from the 'ground-up' resonates closely with our

sense of what is needed and what will be effective. We notice that participatory methods being employed are respectful, effective and productive. We observe that youths are invited to explore and articulate the nature of their lived experience as it relates to the ways of engaging them that is most relevant and effective. As this information is shared with a wide range of stakeholders—from service providers to researchers to policy makers—there is a real potential for change at the community, service sector, and system levels. (Agency Partner Six)

A cross-ministry coordinator from a provincial government agency praised our "youth-oriented participatory action research":

I am particularly pleased that the project has actively engaged vulnerable youth on the steering committee for this project. I appreciate . . . the team's leadership and commitment to the youth of our province. (Agency Partner Eleven)

Knowledge Translation and Practical Application: Advancing Research into Action

Our community partners have acknowledged implications of our project for knowledge translation and practical application to advance research into action:

This research advances the understanding of effective knowledge translation (KT), improves the practice of KT, and supports the use of research evidence in decision-making not only for our organization and partners but also for the youth we work for, as its discoveries will lead to practical applications. We see this as an excellent opportunity for community-based and youth-driven research to have an impact on other institutions working with youth in the community as a crucial step in advancing research into action. (Agency Partner Eight)

A community service coordinator from the municipal government spoke about "usability" for impact:

Usability is important and so, this project involves the application of the knowledge, capacities, resources and experiences gained from these youths in order to see positive impact on practices, policy and systems to better support youth living in marginalized conditions. As a partner involved in this collective effort, we continue to reflect upon and share this knowledge within our own and allied systems. (Agency Partner Twelve)

Another community partner commented on the guiding research question - *How can practices and policies around engagement at personal, social, and community levels be changed to enhance youth's capacity to mobilize the resources needed to promote youth development?* - and its contribution "to the knowledge transfer needed by government, especially, to support policy and programming that will have impact on youth with complex needs" (Agency Partner Nine). Yet another community partner appreciated "the

participatory approach" so necessary for addressing homelessness: "Being able to draw on the knowledge and practical expertise of youth with lived experience strengthens our ability to serve this population in a meaningful and effective manner" (Agency Partner Five).

Furthermore, an administrator from local school systems emphasized this project's synergy with the school district's vision for "improving the lives and opportunities for marginalized youth through working with community organizations":

> This project is very much in keeping with our District's vision for educating our young people. We have a keen interest in improving the lives and opportunities for marginalized youth through working with community organizations to better facilitate the support and direct aid that many of our youth require in order to survive. The use of a participatory action research approach empowers the participants and leads to sustained change and growth in programs that support them. We are a part of this collaborative project to engage targeted youth in conversations about their futures as a means of enabling them to become part of the process of positive change. (Agency Partner Thirteen)

Demonstration of Positive Youth Outcomes

Considering that community agencies are accountable for impacts on the community, community partners showed a keen interest in promoting positive outcomes for high-risk youth. In fact, a community program coordinator who has worked with many of our youth leaders pointed to "a feeling of belonging, self-confidence, and achievement" within youth (Agency Partner Eight). An executive director of a partner youth-serving agency spoke about "a sense of empowerment and pride" shown by our youth: "In our time participating in the Youth4YEG project, we have observed a high quality of youth participation and research activity. YEG (City of Edmonton) youth leaders communicated with a sense of empowerment and pride during activities and dialogues, which focused on vital youth engagement issues" (Agency Partner Ten). A youth program coordinator of the same agency added that our research "brought out a lot of strength and hope," along with a meaningful "relationship" to promote a sense of belonging and "connection" (Agency Partner Ten). A municipal government's community coordinator mentioned building youth capacity "to influence systems and services for the benefit of vulnerable youth and empower these youths to find their voice and to make a difference!" (Agency Partner Twelve).

An executive director of a local youth agency underlined the ability of a strengths-based (as opposed to deficit-based) approach to offer "more empowerment than trying to tackle bringing the weakness up to the 'do' level":

> Activities that provide a self-determination measure of success and engagement to pursue further goals and a way out of poverty with stabilization of risk factors are

essential, by striving to connect youth to engagement that will be empowering and offer lasting traction in the participants' lives and in the local community. I value that this is the aim of Youth4YEG. (Agency Partner Nine)

Collaborative and Coordinated Process in an Iterative and Evolving Way
Besides the outcomes/impacts, community partners appreciated the collaborative and coordinated process that enables an iterative and evolving project planning and execution. The supervisor of a provincial government's "high-risk" youth unit commended the "respectful collaborative approach in an iterative and evolving way, by appreciating and integrating diverse perspectives into coherent and meaningful research":

> This team consists of diverse interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral partners. The use of this collaborative, team-based approach is essential to co-develop and co-implement our research. Our team meetings, as well as email conversations, provide a respectful, safe space and opportunity to discuss and have dialogues on key issues that our community faces and on meaningful approaches to addressing these issues. By directly responding to the needs of our community based on a grass-roots approach, this research is grounded in the community with the support of our diverse community-university partnership. (Agency Partner Two).

Appreciation for "a stellar network of collaborators" was further elaborated by another community partner that is essential to identifying "the best practices to engage youth" (Agency Partner Nine).

Another partner reiterated "significant support and acceptance from fellow community agencies" with a common purpose but limited resources, "which is a true barometer of the quality of work being undertaken by the team": "The research Youth4YEG is undertaking is significant in identifying how our community can best serve a highly marginalized population in meaningful ways towards building an increasingly strong and dynamic young adult population for years to come" (Agency Partner Ten).

Activating the Voice of Youth, Relationship-Building with Youth, and Social Change
Our agency partners acknowledged the significance of this project's vision and purposeful efforts (despite the challenges) to highlight the voice of youth as the "driver" of research:

> This is a project that activates the voice of the marginalized youth that our agency serves. This project places the youth in the role of co-researcher and driver of the research. The key to success with this demographic is the relationships youth form with trusted workers and agencies. The youth must determine the trajectory and the outcome throughout the process. (Agency Partner Nine)

To reiterate these challenges, the coordinator of provincial government's high-risk youth unit emphasized the importance of "non-judgmental" relationship-building with youth in response to our regular project update:

> What youth are looking for is defined by the youth, and a theme that comes up repeatedly in my experience, and this update, is being non-judgmental. This is so important and certainly speaks to how sensitive youth are about interaction with adults that is judgmental. [In the update] the theme of peer interaction, caring and trustworthy people, and doing things in groups continues to repeat the importance of relationship at many levels, and having the 'safety net' in place. As adults, I think we continue to under-estimate the value youth put in the connections with adults they see as safe. (Agency Partner Two)

Furthermore, the same community partner stressed "anti-oppressive practice":

> The update does a wonderful job of capturing the thoughts of youth leaders around oppression, racism, discrimination, and stigma. Obviously, the participation of youth in all aspects of this project is an exercise in anti-oppressive practice and speaks to how youth should not be overlooked as important contributors to a system change. (Agency Partner Two)

Speaking of a system change, another agency partner not only admitted the difficulty in letting go of agency control, but also reminded of the need for "change" in thinking:

> We are an organization that has been around for a long time but we don't have a youth council that can guide our program. It is difficult to let go of control, but the framework (developed by our youth leaders) helps us do that; this helps us change how we think of ourselves as a society. (Agency Partner One)

Another identified the role of Youth4YEG as "the conduit for sourcing and researching youth views on current social justice issues" (Agency Partner Nine).

"Amazing Journey"

Finally, we end this section with one community partner's reflection on this project:

> It has truly been an amazing journey and what a pleasure it has been for me to see the changes in some of these young adults, whom I have known for many years. Some of them have spoken to me about how they feel that they belong no matter what their backgrounds or circumstances have been in life. They are truly inspired to continue on with this work. Needless to say, the work that the youth have done on this project has been incredible, along with the expertise of community representatives, and the willingness to share their time and knowledge has also been a very positive experience to date for myself. It truly has been an invaluable experience and one that needs to continue along! (Agency Partner One)

Summary and Conclusion

This paper highlighted from youth and professional perspectives the complexity of implementing youth-oriented and collaborative research processes in working with youth and community partners on a community-based youth engagement research project. Our research processes have been strategically guided by the talents and lived experiences of youth leaders with the support of our community agency partners. This bottom-up process has not only provided opportunities to appreciate the voices of youth with leadership "for youth by youth," but it has also facilitated co-learning and team work within the group. This youth-oriented process has been flexible and adaptable to the lives of youth in a strengths-based approach, while creating a safe, comfortable, and fun space conducive to optimal youth engagement.

In the pursuit of youth-oriented and collaborative research processes, group dynamics play an essential role. While a common purpose, positive relationship, and trust within the team are critical, effectively dealing with change in the team is also key to success in engaging youth. At the same time, it is extremely important to be cognizant of power issues (even unconscious) including the roles of academic researchers and funding agencies, as well as structural barriers within the context of youth's challenging lives. Thus, respectfully dealing with power issues, including transparency, as described in this paper, is essential to any youth engagement.

Likewise, it is important to acknowledge the potential benefits for community youth-serving agencies and youth themselves. Specifically emphasized were the benefits of capacity-building for community agencies (e.g., youth engagement practice) and youth themselves (e.g., sense of belonging, self-confidence, achievement, pride, and empowerment), as well as knowledge translation and practical application "advancing research into action."

Besides these positive "outcomes/impacts," our community partners greatly appreciated the collaborative and coordinated processes and meaningful youth engagement in a positive, safe, and responsive space. These processes were grounded in youth experiences in participatory research activating the voice of youth, and mobilizing youth and community partners into action toward social change in what one partner called an "amazing journey." Although nothing has been perfect in our collective journey of working with and engaging high-risk youth, the key learnings from our research reported in this paper seem relevant and applicable to various settings where youth engagement, development, and quality of life are a primary focus.

Overall, our research has shown the value of not only building a mutually respectful and trustful relationship with youth and community partners, but it has also demonstrated the significance of youth leadership as "the conduit for sourcing/researching youth views on current social justice issues" and social/system change in "an exercise in anti-oppressive practice" with implications for quality of life for all.

In conclusion, our community-based research project demonstrated the significance of youth leadership and engagement as a powerful mechanism for positive youth

development (PYD), a strengths-based empowering approach, and social justice youth development (SJYD) activating the voice of youth for social/system change, and advancing research into action—knowledge translation and practical application. Accordingly, this research has shown evidence for the usefulness of integrating positive youth development and social youth development within the context of the challenging lives of high-risk youth. Indeed, youth play a key role in transforming our society and creating conditions that are more youth-friendly and that enhance quality of life by creating sustainable futures for those youth and their families.

About the Authors

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Youth4YEG is a youth-led organization (housed within the University of Alberta's Faculty of Extension, Edmonton, Canada) dedicated to youth-led action research through mobilizing youth voices to find out what works best to engage them in the community, and translating these youth voices into actions for changes through collaboration.

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