CREATING A YOUTH-LED RESEARCH TEAM TO ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH AND PREVENT SUICIDE AMONG IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE YOUTH

A Scientific Report

A community-university partnership undertaken by The Multicultural Health Brokers Co-Operative and University of Alberta, School of Public Health

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful for the funding provided by Policywise for Children and Families. We also wish to express our gratitude to the Edmonton Community Foundation (Young Edmonton Grants) that enabled our youth to create a youth video engagement framework. We would like to thank the many individuals and organizations who were part of this project and who spent countless hours and efforts in co-creating our youth-led team. This includes the guest speakers and the volunteers who came to learn with us what it was like to co-create our youth-led team. We would also like to thank Shawn Tse for helping us co-create our youth video engagement framework. Finally, we wish to thank Multicultural Family Resource Society for supporting our youth in helping them realize their journey of addressing immigrant and refugee youth mental health issues and suicide. Our journey enabled us to learn and grow together. We look eagerly to the next chapter!!!

MCHB YOUTH-LED TEAM

Youth-team members: Moataz Aloklah, Eden Askale, Robel Araya, Manju Budhathoki, Tek Chouhan, Alice Musele, Fatima Shahzad, Davinder Sindher, Melissa Uwera

Adult mentors: Yvonne Chiu, Shiva Chapagain, Tigist Dafla, Joud Nour Eddin, Mayrane Galante, Aline Grayawira, Jwamer Jalal, Hala Mostafa, Hina Syed, Pastor Meghisteab Teclemariam, Micheal Tekeste, Jane Springett, Rosslynn Zulla

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Centering youth voices remains essential to the creation of youth-led research teams. Youth-led research teams are becoming prominent strategies to re-focus how youth mental health and well-being should be defined, prioritized, studied and evaluated. Past literature documents nurturing and empowering youth voices requires research training activities and research activities that foreground youths' voices and leverage their skills to address emerging complex issues within their own communities. Despite the promising benefits of youth-led research teams, existing literature demonstrates that in the past 21 years, youth-led research approaches that promote mental health and resiliency rarely document how the foundation was created, implemented and evaluated by youth.

Through funding provided by Policywise for Children and Families, our team sought to learn together how to co-create a youth-led team that would address mental health issues and suicide among immigrant and refugee youth communities. We began our journey exchanging strategies to recruit potential immigrant and refugee youth who could engage with ethnocultural communities but also demonstrated a readiness and a maturity to talk frankly and reflexively about mental health issues and suicide. Oriented within a relational approach that uses education to enhance relationships, our youth created a relational and a learning space. Through facilitated discussions by two adult mentors of our team, our youth learned how to create spaces of safety and connectivity, as well as build their research skills. Leveraging these relational and technical skills, our youth wrote two successful youth-led research proposals that articulated their desire to work with their immigrant and refugee peer youth to learn, heal and advocate against racism. For our youth, they have observed how racism continues to have drastic mental health impacts (e.g., depression and suicide ideation) on immigrant and refugee youth and their communities.

Our learnings from this project taught us that youth-led research teams require a humanistic approach that promotes individual and collective growth in social interactions between adult and youth and intentionally foregrounds youth voices throughout the process. Creating youth-led spaces are emergent and iterative as youth learn to find their voices as leaders and adults learn to perceive youth as capable peers. We recognize this emergent journey is unpredictable and requires 'trusting' the process even if we cannot see the outcomes at the beginning. More importantly, creating youth-led spaces requires all of us to be intentional, humble and frank about the power we have in shaping youth-led spaces. Based on our learnings, we offer some suggestions on how future individuals and organizations can co-create youth-led research teams.

⇒ Have active involvement in youth-based activities

⇒ Be proactive in youth engagement strategies

⇒ Building relationships is intentional and immersive work that requires time

⇒ Use a growth-oriented approach when working with youth

⇒ Refrain from engaging in essentialism when working with youth

⇒ Engage compassionately in your 'internal' work

⇒ Use a trauma-informed approach when working with racialized youth

⇒ Use a strength-based approach when working with racialized youth

⇒ Ensure racialized adult mentors on projects that work with racialized youth

BACKGROUND

Emergence of mental health issues and suicide among youth. Youth mental health issues are increasingly becoming an alarming issue in Canada. Recent estimates suggest that 1.2 million children and youth in Canada will be affected by mental illness but less than 20% will receive appropriate treatment (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2019). Among provinces, Alberta has the second highest rate of suicides in Canada (Statistics Canada, 1997). Among young individuals, suicide is the leading cause of death in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2016) with depression and anxiety emerging in childhood and in adolescence (Malla, Shah, Iyer, Boksa, Joober, Andersson, Lal, & Fuhrer, 2018). Among immigrant and refugee youth populations, knowledge about mental health interventions is sparse with only 17 publications undertaken within a 23-year span (Khan, Khanlou, Stol & Tran, 2018).

The role of youth participatory action research approaches. Youth-led approaches such as youth participatory action research (YPAR) are becoming prominent strategies to re-focus how youth mental health and well-being should be defined, prioritized, studied and evaluated. YPAR is situated within critical pedagogy in which individuals engage in continuous critical reflection and action to enact social change (Freire, 1970). Here, individuals leverage their knowledge and lived experiences to identify and enact possible strategies that can change and improve their lives. At its core, YPAR acknowledges youth as experts in their lived experiences who have the potential to develop solutions to improve their own and their communities' lives (Martinez, Yan, McClay, Varga, & Zaff, 2020). Adults support youth in their development as they learn to develop nuanced complex understandings of how social, environmental, and structural issues shape their health and well-being (Martinez et al., 2020). YPAR is also useful in supporting positive youth development, empowering youth and shaping

youths' consciousness to address complex issues such as racism and family violence within and beyond their communities (Allen-Handy, Thomas-El, & Sung, 2021; Martinez et al., 2020; Rodriguez, Macias, Perez-Garcia, Landeros, & Martinez, 2018).

Illuminating the foundations of YPAR. Guiding frameworks that shape YPAR activities have been built from a grounds-up approach (Iwasaki, Springett, Dashora, McLughlin, McHugh, & Youth Y.E.G.T., 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2018) or shaped by critical frameworks (e.g., social justice youth development) (Allen-Handy et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2020). Within these frameworks, research activities were diverse and foreground youth voices. For instance, Martinez and colleagues (2020) reported goals of training activities were defined by youth and logistics were co-shared between adults and youth. Training activities were diverse and collective activities helped youth learn about their topic as well as helped them learn about each other (Martinez et al., 2020). In another example, Rodriguez and colleagues (2018) reported youth defined protocols for project implementation (e.g., project expectations, project roles, and time commitment to project) with adults (e.g., graduate assistants) who supported their learning goals (e.g., provide research training to youth) and helped them to address any potential participation barriers (e.g., providing transportation and meals for meetings). Such examples give greater clarity on how youth voices need to be at the center of YPAR approaches.

The role of YPAR in addressing youth mental health research issues. Since 2000, YPAR approaches have been used to promote mental health and resilience among youth aged 10-30 years old who come from marginalized groups (e.g., have an immigrant and refugee background, have an indigenous background, are racialized, homeless or come from a disadvantaged background). (Raanaas, Bjøtegaard, & Shaw, 2020). Despite the history of YPAR approaches, engagement with youth throughout the research process is inconsistent. For

instance, while 18 out of 49 studies report engaging youth in the design (e.g., formulation of interview guides) or implementation (e.g., conducting interviews) of the study, none of these studies explicitly identify whether youth were involved in the framing of research questions (Raanaas, et al., 2020). Of the five studies that focused on immigrant and refugee youth, none documented how the foundation of the YPAR approach was created, shaped and evaluated by youth (Raanaas et al., 2020). Such gaps highlight the need for further studies to document the foundation of YPAR approaches that seek to promote mental health and nurture resiliency.

Objectives of our project. In the past year, in a community-university project, the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-Operative (herein refer to MCHB) and the University of Alberta, School of Public Health (herein referred to as UofA, SPH), began to build youth spaces to begin addressing mental health issues and suicide among immigrant and refugee youth. Our strategy was to create and nurture a group of immigrant and refugee youth who could use research to identify and address existing and emerging mental health issues experienced by immigrant and refugee peers and their families. The basis of our project was to learn together how to develop a YPAR approach that foregrounded immigrant and refugee youth voices.

Beginning our project. Our project began with a series of preliminary meetings between a team of 5 ethnocultural community leaders who are also members of the MCHB, 2 staff members from MCHB and two academic researchers from UofA, SPH. Community leaders came from five ethno-cultural communities: Ethopian/Eritrean, Syrian, Bhutanese, Kurdish and Southeast Asian. Our project meetings focused on identifying how a provincial grant opportunity (e.g., Policywise for Children and Families, Youth Suicide Prevention Grant) could build youth capacity to address mental health issues and suicide experienced by immigrant and refugee youth and their families. We generated a proposal that sought to (i) develop a

community-university partnership, (ii) build partnerships with organizations providing services to youth, (iii) develop a repository to support youth in their development as researchers, (iv) develop a youth-led proposal that would work towards addressing mental health and suicide amongst immigrant and refugee youth, and (v) generate lessons about creating partnerships to support youth-led initiatives.

METHODS

Project team members. Initially, the team began with 9 individuals with diverse representation from different ethnocultural communities and two different organizations (MCHB and UofA, SPH). Following the onset of this project, 4 community leaders who were also members of the MCHB, were added to provide guidance in recruiting youth as well as to support youth throughout this project. These individuals had connections with other organizations that could potentially support the recruitment of youth such as Alberta Family-Youth Alliance (AJFAS). The final group comprised of 13 adult mentors. Potential youth would be recruited from five different ethnocultural communities: Ethopian/Eritrean, Syrian, Bhutanese, Afro-Francophone and Southeast Asian. Our collective journey is represented in Figure 1 which provides a summary of our activities and our milestones.

Project meetings. Our monthly project meetings began March 2020 and ended November 2021. The first five months guided the implementation of the project as follows,

(i) Identifying the roles of youth and adult mentors and project logistics

Our team of adult mentors agreed that the role of adults would be to foreground youth's voices and as such provide feedback and any information or psychosocial support (if needed). Two adult mentors of our team (our coordinator and one of our adult mentors) would schedule and facilitate meetings with youth. Potential project activities would be directed by youth with

Figure 1: Our journey of co-creating a youth-led research team

feedback from adult mentors (when requested by youth). Given the public health protocols, we agreed to hold all adult and youth team meetings using online platforms (e.g., Zoom).

(ii) Identifying recruitment strategies and inclusion criteria

Given the nature of the topic (e.g., mental health and suicide) and its perception as a taboo subject within multiple ethnocultural communities, our team of adult mentors identified diverse criteria that could guide recruitment of youth. Inclusion criteria for the project included: (i) potential leadership (e.g., demonstrated experience in supporting and/or mobilizing communities), (ii) relational (e.g., compassion) (iii) education related to supporting communities (e.g., enrolled in or had a social work, psychology, or education degree), demographic (e.g., gender) characteristics, youth readiness and youth maturity. We agreed to identify 2 youth (1 male and 1 female) from each ethno-cultural community in order to be sensitive to the mental health issues experienced differentially by male and female youth in these ethnocultural communities. We recruited 10 youth but only 9 accepted to be involved in this project.

(iii) Identifying the components of a research training program for youth

Our team of adult mentors generated preliminary guidelines of a youth research training program. We agreed the training program needed (i) a learning environment that promotes experiential and relational learning, and (ii) a lengthy time to nurture youth in participatory thinking. Our guidelines emphasized the need for a formative training program that was process-oriented and guided by youth. We decided an orientation session for potential youth would be helpful to gauge their perceptions in this project and to engage in participatory planning exercises so they can also shape research training, proposal development and other research activities.

(iv) Identifying potential organizations that could support youth

Our team agreed to have ongoing meetings to invite organizations who would be interested in supporting a youth-led research group.

Partner organization meetings. Members of our adult team met with different representatives of different organizations to assess the feasibility of providing spaces for youth to nurture their research skills and interests as well as to support their future project ideas of implementing healing conversations. Meetings involved community leaders and organizations who use community arts for social change, community leaders who work with imams and other faith leaders, community leaders who work with school representatives (e.g., School Trustees) and funding organizations who support youth mental health.

Youth research team meetings

Planning meetings. Planning meetings were conducted between July 2020 and early October 2020. Prior to July 2020, upon receiving the contact information of potential youth from the project team, our coordinator called and spoke to each youth to gauge their interest in the

project and to identify potential meeting times. At the orientation (August 2020), a potential plan of the project and the project timeline was presented to our youth who shared their perspectives about its feasibility and their expectations of the project. Subsequent planning team meetings were completed to explore our youths' interests in being part of a mental health and suicide project, to identify potential mental health and suicide research topics, to generate potential solutions that could address these issues, to generate youths' research skills they wanted to learn and to generate guidelines that would shape our future meetings. These planning meetings helped to create a team identity that ultimately became the title for two youth-led proposals (Growing and building our communities). Based on these meetings, our coordinator generated an outline of a research training program that our youth revised and approved its final version. The final 11-week training program comprised of 11 topics including: participatory research, ethics, approaches to exploring mental health (ADAPT model and an ecological model), data collection methods (e.g., body-mapping, World Café, photovoice, individual interviews and focus groups), generating research questions, goals and outcomes, self-care and researcher positionality (e.g., doing research as a racialized individual).

Research training meetings. Research training meetings began in mid-October 2020 and ended in early February 2021. Training sessions were informed by a relational approach in which education is perceived as the process to enhance relationships (Gergen, 2009). Three assumptions underpin a relational approach: learning is embedded within social relationships, what we learn is contextual and heterogenous. These assumptions emphasize key practices: non-hierarchical relationships between learners, dialogue is the foundation of learning, and learning is undertaken using different modalities and with different people. A peer-learning approach was used to reflect these key practices. Short presentations on learning topics were made by our

coordinator supplemented by group activities (e.g., storytelling and art-based activities) that applied learnings. Content of group activities were designed by our youth. Invited guest speakers were identified by our youth and our two adult facilitators. Guest speakers shared their experiences about working in specific areas related to mental health, ethics, self-care, participatory research and researcher positionality.

Video engagement framework meetings. Proposal planning for an application to obtain funds to create a youth-led engagement framework began in early February and ended in March 2021. Our youth wrote the proposal. A host partner (Multicultural Family Resource Society) and a filmmaker was identified by our team of adult mentors to support the proposal. Following acceptance of the proposal to the Edmonton Community Foundation, Young Edmonton Grants, script and production planning and filming were completed from August to October 2021. Both the filmmaker and our two adult facilitators held planning meetings and our youth developed the content for script and video production. Filming and editing were completed between October to November 2021. Only those who were interested would appear in the video.

Proposal meetings. Proposal meetings began in mid-February 2021 and ended in early July 2021. Our team of adult mentors identified potential funding opportunities for our youth given adults had more knowledge of the funding landscape. Our youth assessed these funding opportunities and selection was based on its orientation to youth (e.g., Is the opportunity supporting youth-led or youth-based activities?), relevance to mental health and suicide (e.g., Does the opportunity seek to address youth mental health issues and suicide?), feasibility (e.g., Will we be able to complete research activities within the grant's duration?) and written requirements (e.g., Will we complete all proposal activities within our existing capacity?) Selected research funding opportunities were local (City of Edmonton, Anti-Racism Grant, Local

Community Participatory Action Research, herein referred to as City of Edmonton) and national (Sandbox Project). Racism was selected as a research topic as our youth felt it has been an emerging issue that is often difficult to discuss within ethnocultural communities particularly among younger individuals (e.g., children and teenagers). Its mental health impacts were familiar among our youth as they have both experienced and observed these impacts among other immigrant and refugee youth and their families.

Our coordinator facilitated proposal planning and writing activities and provided a short presentation on grant-writing. Our youth team divided into sub-teams: a core team comprising all youth members who would shape the content of the proposal and a second team who would be in charge of writing the grant application including the proposal. Identified content (e.g., research goals, target sample, research activities, research outcomes, plans for dissemination, host organization and individual or organizational partners) for both proposals and grant applications were generated by our youth. Written components of the City of Edmonton Anti-Racism proposal were undertaken by our youth who were interested in learning to do grant-writing and applying these skills. Adult support was requested by our youth, when needed. For instance, our youth requested our coordinator to draft a written proposal for the Sandbox Project opportunity given the imminent deadline and the final draft was approved by our youth. Proposal ideas for both opportunities were presented to our adult mentors to obtain any feedback prior to submitting the grant application. Both submitted applications received approval from funders.

Both proposals sought to implement healing conversations in different community settings to address racism. The Sandbox Project aimed to have partnership conversations with school and faith communities to help design healing conversations in formal and/or faith learning spaces for youth from different ethnocultural groups. Here, a survey would be developed to

gauge topics and logistics that would help support schools and faiths' capacity to implement healing conversations. The City of Edmonton Anti-Racism Project aimed to implement healing conversations within informal community spaces for racialized youth. Here, racialized youth would use arts-based activities (e.g., body mapping) and dialogue (e.g., narratives) as tools for youth to exchange stories of racism, strategies to heal from racism and strategies to advocate against racism. Involvement in these healing conversations would help potential participants gain skills to host their own healing dialogues within communities. By implementing healing conversations, both projects seek to promote protective factors that can help youth learn together how to heal and advocate against racism.

Reflection meetings

Planning, implementation and analysis of our reflections began in July 2021 and ended in November 2021. Our youth identified separate open-ended questions that could guide their own and our adult mentors' project reflections over the past year. Youth and adult group reflections were facilitated by our youth. Individual interviews were offered to any member who could not attend a group meeting. Individual interviews were conducted by our coordinator. All interviews were recorded by our coordinator. All participants agreed to participate and to be recorded. Group reflections were transcribed by our coordinator. Given our project deadline was nearing, our coordinator decided to analyze our reflections, but our youth participated in the initial coding of data. Emergent themes were shared with all team members for approval. Recommendations from our project were generated by our youth.

RESULTS

Our reflections helped us to articulate our approach to creating a youth-led team that honors and values immigrant and refugee youth voices. These emergent themes represent (i)

how and why we began this project, (ii) *how we prepared for the project*, (iii) *how we created our process to create our youth-led spaces*, and (iv) *the gains we had and our future outlook*.

How and why we began our project

In the past several years, our team of adult mentors observed a rise in mental health issues and suicide experienced by immigrant and refugee youth in different ethnocultural communities. As cultural brokers, our adult mentors witnessed how the combination of social and structural issues (e.g., poverty, racism in schools, intergenerational relationship difficulties and core cultural identity issues) created deep and lasting impacts on the mental health of youth. In addition to these issues, many individuals or families from four ethnocultural communities (Afro-Francophone, Bhutanese, Eritrean and Syrian) are refugees. The majority of youth from these communities experienced significant pre-migration trauma or have parents who have post-traumatic stress disorder.

While adult mentors were able to support families as cultural brokers, adult mentors felt they could not support young family members because they could not relate to youth as well as they could to adult family members. In addition to this barrier, adult mentors felt discussing and seeking help to address mental health issues and suicide were rarely initiated and practiced by youth. This was largely attributed to community perceptions that conversation of mental health and suicide are taboo topics and often seen as ancillary concerns. As well, availability (e.g., spaces to seek mental health supports) and accessibility (e.g., immigrant and refugee youth have a historical distrust with supports in schools due to a prior history of not receiving appropriate supports) created further barriers for immigrant and refugee youth seeking help.

Our adult mentors also highlighted the lack of capacity to support the mental health needs of immigrant and refugee youth from different ethnocultural communities. Our adult mentors

recognized they are limited in their capacity to provide ongoing long-term support to immigrant and refugee families. Beyond mental health issues and suicide, our adult mentors felt that capacity was needed to support immigrant and refugee families in other areas (e.g., school, employment and health). As such, building youth capacity to address mental health issues was deemed an immediate and a future need to ensure the next generation would be equipped in the future to support immigrant and refugee families.

However, building youth capacity can be a challenging task as our adult mentors described existing barriers that prevented the creation of supportive spaces for immigrant and refugee youth. Spaces in which immigrant and refugee youth could nurture their voices and subsequently their leadership skills were often absent in both formal and informal settings. For instance, several adult mentors felt formal school settings lacked ample and optimal opportunities to nurture youth leadership among immigrant and refugee communities. Likewise, a few adult mentors felt immigrant and refugee youth may not often be given leadership opportunities within their own ethnocultural community as youth are often perceived by adults as lacking the expertise and experience to lead projects and thus require guidance from adults.

How we prepared for our project

Our team of adult mentors felt the creation of youth-led community spaces were urgently needed to build youth connectivity and capacity. We described these spaces where immigrant and refugee youth could nurture each other as well as be supported by adult mentors as they progress in their trajectory as leaders. Youth-led community spaces served multiple functions for immigrant and refugee youth: to create safe and connecting spaces through collective activities (e.g., sharing their mental health experiences) as well as to develop their potential to be leaders in addressing mental health issues and suicide within their own communities. As such,

youth-led community spaces were essential in helping immigrant and refugee youth to articulate and implement their vision, as highlighted by one adult mentor,

> *'These youth have their own potential, they have a platform, they need an opportunity. We need to release them to use their own drive, their own creativity. We are parents, we are adults, we have our own skills, our own experience and they might not have their experience but they have the idea of creating their own method of creating research.'*

We identified two key principles that would create the foundation for the project. First, immigrant and refugee youth were the central decision-makers. In youth-led spaces, youth would use relational (e.g., connections they make with each other) and environmental resources (e.g., adult mentors) to build on their existing resources and nurture their potential and vision to address immigrant and refugee youth mental health issues and suicide. Second, a humanistic approach emphasized an orientation towards individual and collective growth. This would be reflected in interactions and learning activities between adults and youth and amongst youth that stressed peer learning and relational responsibility (e.g., how can we take care of each other as we learn together).

Our team of adult mentors developed inclusion criteria for the recruitment of immigrant and refugee youth. Criteria demonstrated a set of attributes that reflect how we engage with our ethnocultural communities as well as how we embody these attributes in our work to support our communities. Age (e.g., older youth), gender (a male and a female), prior experience working with communities, enrolled or held a degree devoted to supporting communities, a readiness to articulate and address mental health issues and suicide, and a youth's maturity to be involved in a project comprised the criteria. For many adult mentors, youth readiness reflected youth were able to exchange and reflect on their own traumatic experiences with other peers. This factor

was deemed important given the high potential youth involved in this project would likely have past experiences with trauma related to their migration and/or settlement experiences in Edmonton. As one adult mentor highlighted, youth needed to demonstrate,

> '*capacity in the form of articulation, but moreso in a form of being in a place with trauma that you might have in a certain place, is at a distance, enough that it's away from you, that is safe, that you reconciled with it in a way that's safe, only youth that we have who receive the proper support can do that and have been able to do that can really engage'*.

Also, several adult mentors felt youth's maturity was a key indicator that reflected motivational (e.g., a dedication to social justice issues and a strong internal work ethic), relational (e.g., can work with others) and organizational skills (e.g., can manage time) that collectively would ensure youth could work with each other on a year-long project. Despite these inclusive criteria, we highlighted barriers that could potentially hinder youth's participation. Identified barriers included learning to manage multiple roles in different social worlds (e.g., managing their school life, their work life and their family life), having multiple responsibilities or obligations (e.g., going to school and caretaking for their family) and having existing struggles.

Strategies to recruit were diverse amongst our team. While we consulted each other, some adult mentors chose to implement recruitment strategies within their community collectively. In contrast, other adult mentors undertook recruitment on their own. How to approach youth also varied as some adult mentors (e.g., Eritrean/Ethopian) had existing connections to potential youth and thus were able to speak to youth about our project. For other adult mentors (e.g., Southeast Asian), cultural protocols for engagement needed to be applied for youth recruitment, as one adult mentor highlighted,

'*you have to go through the Elders, although they were independent, they were over 18, they had all those skills but still, you need to go through the parents and I never talked to the youth about this. I explained the project to the parents and they explained it to the youth…This is the boundary that we have to practice in our community, that it has to go through the parents and give parents the power to talk to the kiddos''*

How we created our process to create our youth-led spaces

Central to the creation of our youth-led spaces were three components that intertwined with each other: (i) creating a relational and a learning space with each other, (ii) evolving with each other and (iii) learning to balance power dynamics. The first steps began by our youth co-creating learning rules that guided weekly discussions and shaped how they would relate to each other and their adult mentors (our two adult facilitators), as highlighted by one youth member,

'We chose to respect these ground rules that we all kind of created, at the very first beginning, so that helped us to respect each other to kind of listen to each other's perspective and taking turns and also being supportive to each other's perspective, I guess, instead of just challenging each other, we chose to respect each other'.

A prominent guideline deemed useful by our youth were 'check-ins' that enabled us to exchange and reflect on daily life and 'check-outs' that allowed for collective reflection on learned content (e.g., learning about racism) and subsequent relational outcomes (e.g., how learning together made me relate with my peers). These guidelines created the platform to learn together how to practice and embody virtues (e.g., respect, responsibility, honor, trust, and flexibility) on a weekly basis. In turn, the emergence of these virtues created a sense of safety and connectivity. Parallel to this creation of a relational space was also the emergence of a common research interest and goals that guided subsequent project activities. Collective learning activities enabled

youth to articulate their specific research interests, goals and activities based on our project's general goals.

This practiced peer-based learning approach extended to adult guest interactions. Guest adult speakers were invited during the research training program or helped to complete project activities (e.g., completing the video engagement framework and preparing dialogues with imams and school personnel). Here interactions between adults and youth were oriented towards learning with each other as one youth observed,

> *I think it's really cool that we got all these people to come to our meetings for us to meet them and like, we got to work with them, you know, it wasn't just like meeting guest speakers, it was actually getting to interact with them and learn from and have dialogues and conversations, it was good.*

Time became key to the creation and nurturance of this relational and learning space. Learning to work together was an organic and iterative process. Our youth and our two adult facilitators learned how to think, act and reflect collectively as well as learned how to adapt to project and life dynamics. Time was also necessary for shifting of power, from adults (our two adult facilitators) to youth, as emphasized by one youth,

> *'I think we all noticed it in the group, like how, like for myself, some of the group members, so we're students, so we're used to like deadlines, and like, somebody yelling at us to get something done on time, so I think that it was really good to get to learn, like in a really encouraging space and then move from learning, to sharing, and then from sharing to like actually leading some of those things and that took time to evolve.*

Relational spaces also were created by being attentive to existing and learning to balance power dynamics. For our two adult facilitators, they facilitated the relational and learning

spaces, as well, they had extensive experience in community-based research and were older. These differences created power differentials between our youth and our two adult facilitators. As such, our two adult facilitators were intentional in striving to balance these differentials. For instance, they practiced reflexivity by engaging in three processes: being intentional about their power, being attentive to the present, acting with humility (i.e., I am flawed and thus not the expert), recognizing how prior student/teacher or student/mentor past relations influenced their current experience with our youth, and exploring how to be relational with youth in their presence (e.g., How are we being responsible to each other?)

Our gains and our future outlook

All of us felt the project met or exceeded our expectations. For our youth, gains included a sense of community, a sense of validation, knowledge about participatory research, general research skills, enhanced their knowledge about different learning styles, enhanced knowledge about mental health and/or suicide and its differential impacts on individuals. For youth, reflecting on their experiences and articulating their goals and interests into proposals were poignant meaningful experiences, as attested by one youth,

> *'Learning like our voices matter, like about, like our ideas matter too, you know, I've always felt like, 'hey we're still so young, like, ah, you know, who's going to take our ideas, seriously? But then like, applying for grants and um, getting it accepted, based on our ideas, that was a really great feeling because it showed that like, people are interested in what we want to say and like what we've learned'*

Likewise, our adult mentors expressed gratitude and were elated that our youth had opportunities to enhance their knowledge, to nurture their potentials and achieve success (i.e., apply and obtain

funding from a local and national organization). Second, our adult mentors were thrilled that our youth created dialogue spaces to exchange and reflect from traumatic experiences (i.e., racism).

Gains emerging from this project had cascading immediate impacts for all of us. For our youth, project experiences taught them facilitation skills and research approaches that can be utilized for future community projects. Further, challenges experienced by our youth (e.g., not having clear roles and not distributing writing roles equally) helped sharpen their planning and facilitation skills for future project activities (e.g., try to incorporate accountability by delegating writing roles equally). Likewise, our two adult facilitators felt online platforms challenged us to be creative in how we maintain motivation and engagement with our youth (i.e., have online spaces). While most of our youth were able to attend most classes, a few could only attend some meetings because meeting times conflicted with family/work/school responsibilities. These experiences spurred reflections on how we can further revise future project goals to create other opportunities for youth to learn about participatory research without using a group setting.

For other adult mentors, observing youth's progress and success, increased the attainability of replicating or creating their own future youth-led and youth-focused projects in other settings. More importantly, project gains attained by our youth demonstrated that youth could be perceived as change agents, as one adult highlighted,

> *'The main impact that it can have on anyone's life but especially a young person's life, they can like think, 'wait I can do it, I did it in the past, I know that I am capable of doing things. I know it is hard but I have the skills for that.' So honestly, seeing that happen and seeing this kind of project that will do that for people and is doing that for people and I think that's how change actually happens.*

Further, the success of our project sparked an organizational initiative to address racism within daily settings. In particular, the MCHB began dialogues to identify how participatory research can be used as a tool to help our communities address and heal from daily life racism encounters.

DISCUSSION

Summary. Our project focused on building youth capacity to address immigrant and refugee youth mental health issues and suicide. To attain this goal, a youth-led research team was created comprising of youth from different ethnocultural backgrounds, genders and ages. In the past year, immigrant and refugee youth were involved in a 11-week research training program and engaged in proposal writing and knowledge mobilization activities. When requested by our youth, our team of adult mentors provided support to them. These collected activities helped youth to co-create a safe and connecting space which helped nurture their relational and research skills.

Implications on practice. Our learnings offer insights in addressing immigrant and refugee youth mental health and suicide. As stated in the *Building Strength, Inspiring Hope Action Plan*, the goal to address and reduce Alberta's youth mental health issues and suicide relies on ensuring Albertan youth feel heard, supported and valued and there is a collaborative effort to prevent youth suicide and mental health issues. Learnings from our project suggest a youth-led research team creates the platform for mental health and suicide to be defined, prioritized, studied and evaluated by youth. The creation of a youth-led team requires a power shift whereby youth voices must be foregrounded, and adults' roles are to support youth in becoming decisions-makers and in identifying, implementing and evaluating strategies. This power shift requires time and intentional effort as youth learn to find their voices as leaders and adults learn to perceive youth as capable peers. As such, proactive strategies and policies to

intentionally build meaningful relationships between youth and adults must be undertaken as early as possible, preferably before designing and implementing youth mental health and suicide interventions.

Our learnings also provide suggestions on approaches that help youth-led research teams define mental health and suicide. Approaches that nurture conscientization, strength-based thinking and trauma-informed thinking promote youth to define mental health issues and suicide in ecological, relational and reflexive ways. To address mental health issues and suicide is to promote protective factors that are found within individuals, families and their communities. Such an approach is integral when working with racialized immigrant and refugee youth given deficit-based approaches have historically shaped mental health or suicide interventions. YPAR on its own or paired with positive youth development or social justice development approaches are possible ways to nurture these critical skills (Allen-Handy et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2020; Rodriguez et al., 2018). Further, approaches must focus on developing these skills in embodied ways and on an ongoing basis. These considerations emphasize relational learning platforms and learning from different individuals and in different situations.

Limitations. Our project sought to build youth-led teams within a nest of community informal and formal organizations that support youth as researchers. Unfortunately, we were unable to have meetings between formal community organizations and our youth. We believe this was largely due to the time needed to nurture youths' voices and to direct project activities. Also, we wanted to work with formal community organizations that youth were interested in partnering so as to support youths' vision of implementing their healing conversations. Nevertheless, through the youth-led proposal development activities, we were able to partner with additional community leaders, immigrant-serving agencies and a local and national funder

to support youth in their future research projects. As such, our team believes future opportunities will provide platforms to work with formal community organizations. We recognize our journey in shaping a youth-led team to address immigrant and refugee youth mental health issues and suicide is unique and shaped by our past approaches to working with different communities. We encourage future research to explore and document how they create youth-led teams. We suggest future research should evaluate how these youth-led teams center youth voices' throughout the process, from its initiation to its completion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations from this project emerged from our youth members' experience of learning to create a youth-led research team that was supported by adult mentors. We offer these suggestions to emphasize the need to use 'proactive' and 'positive-oriented' strategies when working with youth particularly racialized youth from immigrant and refugee communities.

1. **Have active involvement in youth-based activities.**

   Opportunities in youth-based activities need to be active in that youth should be part of the decision-making process. To achieve this, opportunities should focus on nurturing youth to help them attain the knowledge and skills that can help them participate, if not, lead decision-making processes. Active involvement by youth ensures that goals and outcomes are youth-oriented and have meaningful outcomes for youth who participate in these activities.

2. **Be proactive in youth engagement strategies.**

   The success of youth-based activities relies on building relationships and having extensive youth recruitment strategies. Engaging youth requires adults actively seeking to build meaningful relationships with youth. Adults need to learn about youth's intentions

and passions, and how they are connected to their communities. Adults should exchange ideas but also exchange stories with youth. Seeing shared experiences builds a common interest between adults and youth and diverse experiences broadens the worldview for both. Adults need to use multiple strategies (e.g., use in-person and social media) that use culturally-relevant and culturally-sensitive information to recruit youth.

3. **Building relationships is intentional and immersive work that requires time**

   Learning about each other to build a meaningful relationship is an investment. When we interact with each other, we exchange our presence, our experiences, our intentions, our emotions and our worldviews. This relational exchange is an immersive and an ongoing experience that shapes who we are and how valuable we are to each other. This relational exchange is integral in creating the platform from which a common group identity emerges (e.g., Who do we represent and wish to address?). To attain these goals is to take time, to be patient and to trust the process. In community-based work, adults and youth learning about each other needs to be intentional and emergent to allow for this relational exchange to occur and to generate shared goals and outcomes.

4. **Use a growth-oriented approach when working with youth**

   Working with youth needs to be oriented within a growth-oriented approach. Here, relationships built through any social or learning activities must be focused on individual and collective growth between adults and youth. This approach requires time and compassion as youth and adults learn from and grow with each other.

5. **Refrain from engaging in 'essentialism' when working with youth**

   Youth are a heterogeneous group and can come from diverse socio-economic, abilities, sexual/gender identities and ethno-cultural backgrounds. Their histories are nuanced and

specific to each individual. Their social roles and responsibilities (e.g., family roles, work roles, school and career roles and responsibilities) are diverse, multiple and always evolving. Planning youth-based activities must incorporate the diversity of youth and their unique needs to support them.

6. **Engage compassionately in your 'internal' work.**

   Adults and youth must be attentive to biases or stereotypes (e.g., youth are lazy, immature and not knowledgeable) that can influence how they work with each other. As such, youth and adults must be intentional in unpacking these biases to understand how and why these biases emerge and subsequently promote power differentials between them. This work is hard but must be undertaken on an ongoing basis to promote equality between adults and youth.

7. **Use a trauma-informed approach when working with racialized youth.**

   Safe and inclusive spaces need to be created for racialized youth voices to be heard. When working with racialized youth, be aware that there is a possibility some may have experienced past traumas that may impact their sense of safety. As such, working from a trauma-informed approach helps youth to be aware of their own triggers, emotions and reactions in social situations. These approaches help youth to clear their mind before assessing and acting in social situations. Trauma-informed approaches are proactive and positive oriented approaches that nurture resiliency within youth.

8. **Use a strength-based approach when working with racialized youth**

   Working with youth requires an intention to highlight and work from their strengths/assets. Promoting a strength-based approach orients youth to perceive themselves in positive ways (e.g., I have hope and I am capable). A strength-based

approach permeates resiliency thinking as the approach encourages youth to perceive their experiences and differences as assets that shaped their growth and identity. This is particularly important given that racialized youth have likely experienced racism and other forms of discrimination (e.g., xenophobia, sexism, and Islamophobia) based on other social identities they have (e.g., immigrant, female and Muslim).

9. **Ensure racialized adult mentors on projects that work with racialized youth.** Racialized mentors are helpful, if not, essential role models who can support racialized youth. Racialized mentors can be helpful avenues for youth to learn how to orient oneself in different social settings. They can also provide helpful hints to youth about how to situate oneself within research projects that are accountable to the communities that they live in, work in and conduct research with. These are important lessons given that racialized youth will likely lead and/or implement research projects within their own communities. To strive towards equality between racialized youth and adults, racialized adult mentors need to be reflexive about their power on an ongoing basis and offer support when youth request help.

CONCLUSION

Our learnings taught us that youth-led research teams take time to create and require approaches that foreground youths' voices throughout the process and allow us to explore how we can grow individually and collectively.

References

Allen-Handy, A., Thomas-El,S. L., & Sung, K. K. (2021). Urban youth scholars: Cultivating critical global leadership development through youth-led justice-oriented research. *The Urban Review,* 53, 264-294.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* Seabury Press.

Gergen, P. (2011). *Relational being: Beyond self and community*. Oxford University.

Iwasaki, Y., Springett, J., Dashora, P., McLaughlin, A., McHugh, T., & Youth 4 YEG Team. (2015). Youth-guided youth engagement: Participatory action research (PAR) with high-risk marginalized youth. *Journal of Child and Youth Services,* 35(4), 316-342.

Malla, A., Shah, J., Iyer, S., Boksa, P., Joober, R., Andersson, N., Lal, S., Fuhrer, R. (2018). Youth mental health should be a top priority for health care in Canada. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 63*(4), 216-222.

Martinez, L. S., Yan, C. T., McClay, C., Varga, S., & Zaff, J. F. (2020). Adult reflection on engaging youth of color in research and action: A case study from five U.S. cities. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 35*(6), 699-727.

Mental Health Commission of Canada. (2019). *Children and youth.* Retrieved from https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/what-we-do/children-and-youth Public Health Agency of Canada (2016). *Suicide in Canada: Current context.* Retrieved from https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/suicide canada-infographic.html

Raanaas, R. K., Bjøtegaard, H. Ø., & Shaw, L. (2020). A scoping review of participatory action research to promote mental health and resilience in youth and adolescents. *Adolescent Research Review,* 5, 137-152.

Public Health Agency of Canada (2016). *Suicide in Canada: Current context.* Retrieved from

https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/suicide-canada-infographic.html

Rodriguez, R., Macias, R. L., Perez-Garcia, R., Landeros, G., & Martinez, A. (2018). Action research at the intersection of structural and family violence in an immigrant Latino community: A youth-led study. *Journal of Family Violence,* 33, 587-596.

Statistics Canada (1997). *Leading Causes of Death in Canada.* (Cat No. 84F0503-XPB).