Engaging and Inspiring “High-Risk, Marginalized” Youth: Executive Summary
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Context and Rationale: One of the major social and community issues is to more effectively support youth living with high-risk conditions such as poverty, homelessness, abusive and addictive behaviours, mental health issues, stigma, and social exclusion. Addressing this issue presents a significant challenge in our society, because they are often socially marginalized and distrustful of existing support systems. The literature on working with high-risk youth points to both the importance and challenges of using a youth-centred approach to building positive, meaningful relationships with youth. It highlights respect and active engagement of youth as key to successful support. However, the existing literature fails to examine truly youth-guided approaches to engaging and supporting high-risk youth.

Our “youth engagement” participatory action research (PAR) project aims to address this gap by strategically using youth-centred engagement and leadership approaches. Our youth leaders in our Youth4YEG team are co-drivers/co-researchers to guide the trajectory of the project. Through using this youth-centred approach, this project engages partners and stakeholders including youth leaders and participants, practitioners, government policymakers, and academic researchers, as to how to improve youth engagement at personal, family, and community levels. We use a PAR approach to address the following overarching research question: How can practices and policies around engagement at personal, family, and community levels be changed to enhance youth’s capacity to mobilize the resources needed to promote youth development?

The most innovative and unique aspect of our research is its strategic use of youth leadership; our youth leaders, an essential part of our research team, support, mentor, and inspire high-risk youth in their pursuit of a more positive, engaged, and meaningful life. In addition to being guided by the talents, voices, and lived experiences of our youths, another strength of our research is its integration of interdisciplinary and cross-sectorial partners and stakeholders. This youth-guided approach to working collaboratively with our community and university partners represents a more equitable, just, and grounded way of improving support systems for high-risk youth and, hopefully, to inspire them to the possibilities of pursuing a meaningful life.

Milestones: So far, our overall project involved: (a) the youth-guided development of a framework of youth engagement (including youth-identified nine key themes such as relationship-building, opportunities, empowerment, and achievements); (b) pilot-testing of this framework through facilitating a series of engagement sessions with youth recruited locally; and (c) hosting of a local youth conference named “2K15 Youth4YEG Forum” with the themes of
“finding your voice” (building youth’s self-awareness and claiming youth’s own truth by sharing youth’s stories, and focusing on inspiration, advocacy, and social change) and “transferable skills” (transferring and applying youth’s skills to educational, career/employment, and other life opportunities in a positive, constructive way).

ACCFCR funding has enabled our team to successfully conduct our ongoing multi-year research project that focuses on youth engagement and leadership as a youth-oriented way of building youth and agency capacities and driving social change, guided by youth as a proactive agent for change. Last month (October, 2015), our Youth4YEG leaders’ group celebrated three-year anniversary since the very first meeting among the original youth leaders was held on October 26, 2012. Since then the group has grown and transformed organically, and over 200 youth leaders’ meetings have been held at a safe, respectful, and youth-oriented space in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta. We continue to meet every Friday evening for an hour and half where one meeting builds on the previous meetings to be productive and meaningful. We track and document our milestones and impacts by recording meeting minutes, including youth’s updates on the progress of the project.

The original spirit of our commitment to youth engagement through youth leadership for social change remains sustainably using youth-guided participatory action research (PAR), while a series of youth-led activities have been carried out to integrate the elements of research-based inquiries and practical applications. Importantly, youth plays a key role in promoting social/system change to achieve this goal. The power of youth in contributing to and enabling social change should not be underestimated! In our Youth4YEG research project, our youth leaders are key contributors to both the processes of and outcomes from the project.

Relationship-building within our youth leaders has been ongoing particularly because the new group has been formed by welcoming four new members from September 2014. As usual, each meeting always begins with “check-in” to get to know where each youth is at by asking check-in questions (e.g., how have you been doing and what is a highlight of the week?) and orient the youth into the meeting. Then, each meeting ends with “check-out” to share each leader’s feedback on the session; conclude each session in a positive, encouraging way; bring everyone together on the same page; and look forward to a next session. One meeting builds on previous meetings so that the group can progress in an incremental way and can clearly identify such progress at the conclusion of each meeting. Meeting notes to describe incremental milestones are also developed, following each meeting. Our Youth4YEG team recognizes that productivity is extremely important as we move forward. In-between meetings, the youth leaders are assigned to do homework (e.g., case study by youth research groups including data collection and analysis and its interpretation and reflection). Then, regular email communications are maintained to remind the agenda for a next meeting, homework, and other project-related information. The majority of main activities involve talking/sharing circles to have a dialogue on and make a decision on taking collective actions to address significant issues that influence the lives of youth. This strategic approach to the use of youth leadership to act on youth issues is consistent with the principles of participatory action research (PAR) (e.g., relationship-building, co-learning, capacity-building, empowering those involved, commitment to social change).
Momentum and Sustainability: Building on the success and achievements of our project so far, our Youth4YEG team has planned to implement youth-led fall and winter events/activities in 2015-16. The team has collectively identified two primary foci of these activities, namely, “poverty” and “identity” issues contextualized within the lives of youth. These are encompassing focus areas that transcend youth crime, homelessness, social justice, and mobility/accessibility issues (related to poverty), as well as race/ethnicity, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer), sexuality, gender, relationships, immigration/refugee, leadership, culture, youth voice, creative expressions, and advocacy issues (related to identity).

Contextualized by the above foci, our Youth4YEG team has brainstormed and decided particular types of activities to be implemented for case studies, along with research goals, research questions, and testable hypotheses, based on each youth leader’s preferences. More specifically, the youth council has been divided into six research groups based on leaders’ preferences to conduct a case study with youth target populations identified (e.g., homeless youth, immigration/refugee youth, youth with disabilities). Each research group gets together between meetings, and each meeting involves update and discussion on ongoing research activities. Specifically, at the meetings, each research group shares what they are doing and what they have accomplished, and seek feedback from fellow youth leaders on their research processes and outcomes.

Each research group is required to develop and present a research report about both the processes of and outcomes from research including data collections, analyses, and interpretations/meaning-making at the conclusion of each case study. We can then collectively develop a comprehensive youth-led research report. Following the completion of these case studies by our youth research groups, we will host a community forum by inviting our community and university partners/stakeholders to share and showcase our achievements and seek their feedback on these and next steps of our overall PAR youth engagement project.

It is important to reiterate that our youth leaders are the ones who are responsible for and in charge of their research activities within their case studies throughout the entire research process. Examples include the use of youth-oriented data collection methods such as creative activities (e.g., arts), videos, social media, and on-line surveys, as well as personal interviews and focus groups with youth-friendly probing, all of which are facilitated by youth leaders. Then, at weekly meetings, each youth research group shares their updates and seeks feedback from fellow youth leaders and academic researcher based on the PAR principles (e.g., co-learning, capacity-building).

Please take a look at a recent article published in the *Internal Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, entitled “The role of youth engagement in positive youth development and social justice youth development for high-risk, marginalised youth.” This article was based on reflective experiences documented by our youth leaders and community agency partners through reflective journals, meeting minutes, and support letters regarding our ongoing research. There is another attachment/paper titled “Youth-Guided Youth Engagement: Participatory Action Research (PAR) With High-Risk, Marginalized Youth,” which presents a framework of youth engagement developed over 9 months, using PAR with 16 youth leaders in our community-based research team called Youth4YEG. The latter manuscript has been published in *Child & Youth Services*. 

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