Engaging and Inspiring “High-Risk, Marginalized” Youth: Lay Summary
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Effective support of youth living with poverty, homelessness, abusive behaviours, discrimination, stigma, and social exclusion is a major social and community issue. Providing support for these “high-risk” youth is a significant challenge 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. This project aims to address this gap by strategically using youth-centred engagement and leadership approaches.

In our participatory action research (PAR) project, our youth leaders 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?

So far, our 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).

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.

Overall, our youth-guided PAR project highlights the importance of: (a) relationship-building through mutual respect and co-learning, (b) capacity-building using an non-judgmental, strengths-based approach (as opposed to a deficit-based approach), and (c) our collective commitment to social change. The team has already produced a number of refereed journal articles published in Child & Youth Services; Engaged Scholar Journal; Internal Journal of Adolescence and Youth; Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship; and Relational Child & Youth Care Practice.