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Yoshitaka Iwasaki
University of Alberta

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Youth Engagement—Engaging for Change: Changing for Engagement

Yoshitaka Iwasaki

Abstract

This paper documents the incentives for, processes of, and outcomes from our multi-year community-based research project on youth engagement. In line with the theme of the 15th Annual Conference of the Engagement Scholarship Consortium (ESC)—Engaging for Change: Changing for Engagement—this paper illustrates our project in terms of the conference’s three sub-themes: (1) Why engage?, (2) How do we engage?, and (3) What impacts are we having? Contextualized within these sub-themes, the paper describes opportunities and challenges of youth engagement from youth and professional perspectives by highlighting insights of our youth leaders and community partners, along with some reflective remarks by our university researchers. The paper provides tangible descriptions and illustrations for the significance of “strategic engagement” (Speer & Christens, 2013) by focusing on the use of “strategic youth and partner engagement.” Importantly, this strategic engagement centerpieces the voices and talents of our youth leaders, supported by our community agency partners, along with a background role of university researchers.

The 15th Annual Conference of the Engagement Scholarship Consortium brought together “academics and community members to explore, discuss, debate, and demonstrate why and how both universities and communities are changing.” The overall theme of the conference was “Engaging for Change: Changing for Engagement” that centerpieces the role of engagement in a change-inducing process. It was intended that the conference would provide a variety of opportunities for conversations that are “provocative and intense, calling on us to engage our whole selves in an examination of our motives, our rhetoric, and the impacts we are actually having.” These were strategically described as the three sub-themes of the conference, namely, (1) Why engage? (2) How do we engage? and (3) What impacts are we having?

My paper documents reflective accounts of my research partners who described the incentives for, processes of, and outcomes from our youth engagement research project, matched conceptually with the three sub-themes of the conference. The paper begins with a brief description of our ongoing youth engagement research project, followed by a detailed description of reflective experiences illustrated by our youth leaders (YL) and community agency partners (AP) who have involved in our multi-year project.

Youth Engagement Research Project

Conceptually, our community-based research project, which started in the fall of 2011, focuses on

youth engagement. Engaging youth, especially, youth with high-risk conditions/behaviors (e.g., poverty, homelessness, abusive/addictive behaviors, mental health issues), presents a significant challenge in our society. The reason is that those “high-risk” youths are often disconnected and disengaged and typically distrust the existing support systems (Alicea, Pardo, Conover, Gopalan, & McKay (2012) 2012; Gemert, Peterson, & Lien 2008; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Pearrow, 2008). Yet, effective youth engagement is a key factor for positive youth outcomes at personal (e.g., self-identity, empowerment), social (e.g., belongingness, social support, cultural identity), and community (e.g., system change) levels (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Davidson, Wien, & Anderson, 2010; Lind, 2008; Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). Accordingly, youth engagement through integrating youth leadership is a key concept addressed in our research (Cammarota, 2011; Ross, 2011).

Our youth engagement research also involves engagement with community and university partners. It is recognized that a collaboration across diverse partners and the coordination of partner engagement present a significant challenge due to the differences in organizational culture and orientation, power imbalance, competitive funding structures, etc. potentially leading to a fragmented service-delivery model in our society (Abela & Hankin, 2008; Bashant, 2007; Gemert et al., 2008). To counter this fragmentation, meaningful cross-

sectoral and interdisciplinary partner engagement through ongoing relationship-building can promote a more effective and coordinated system of service-delivery to benefit target populations. Guided by this intention, we have initiated a homegrown project emerged from networks and dialogues with a number of government (i.e., municipal and provincial) and non-profit (i.e., youth and multicultural) agencies and university departments (i.e., extension, social work, human ecology, public health, and physical education & recreation studies) in a western Canadian city. Methodologically, we are conducting participatory action research (PAR) to engage our community and academic partners and facilitate positive changes (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Simich, Waiter, Moorlag, & Ochocka, 2009; Stringer & Genat, 2004). Consequently, our overall goal is that effectively engaging both youth and research partners in a mutually respectful way to build a trustful relationship can lead to a positive transformation and systems change in order to more effectively support our youth in our communities.

More specifically, the key questions being addressed in our research 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 the research is on honoring/highlighting youth's voice and mobilizing youth into actions for social change, specifically, the improvement of support systems (policy & practice) and environments (neighborhoods, schools, & communities), as guided by youth with the support of our community and university partners. Indeed, youth engagement and leadership are a central concept/process throughout the project to achieve the goal of our research.

Reflective Experiences with Project

This main part of the paper describes reflective experiences illustrated by our youth leaders (YL) and community agency partners (AP) who have involved in our community-based research project. Their descriptions and illustrations address (1) Why engage? (2) How do we engage? and (3) What impacts are we having? in line with the sub-themes of the 15th Annual ESC Conference.

Why Engage?

First, as for the question of “why engage,” the

reasons for engagement described by these team members included: (a) having a common purpose, (b) being grounded in youth experiences through participatory research, and (c) advancing research into action through knowledge translation and practical application.

Having a common purpose. One typical response to this “why” question was having a common purpose despite the diversity in the youth leaders’ group composition. One youth leader (abbreviated as YL#1) spoke about a shared mission to challenge the status quo and promote a positive change through effective youth engagement:

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.

Another youth leader’s experience further supported the notion of having a common purpose to create greater opportunities for 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 (YL#4).

One of the immigrant youth leaders was inspired by the desire to bring about a positive change to the community, along with learning from peer youth leaders and participants:

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 (YL#5).

Being grounded in youth experiences through participatory research. Another reason for “why engage” was captured by a community

agency partner who acknowledged the significant role of our participatory research in being “grounded” within the experiences of youth themselves. Youth-guided creation of a framework for youth engagement was appreciated by a community organizer (abbreviated as AP#8) of a multicultural agency:

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.

An executive director of a high-risk youth-serving agency pointed out the importance of providing a safe and responsive space/environment for dialogue among youth to voice their needs and explore issues integral to youth’s lives with its implication to have an impact on community practice and policy change:

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 (AP#9).

A project developer of another multicultural agency resonated with the importance of using this bottom-up or “people-up” approach in working with diverse partners/stakeholders that has implications for change at community and system levels:

It brings marginalized youth together with a wide range of stakeholders so that an effective and meaningful framework for engagement is co-created and articulated. This participatory way of work from the ‘ground-up’ resonates closely with our sense of what is needed and what will be effective. In recent years, the families and community leaders we work closely with have been expressing concern about the effects of exclusion and marginalization

on newcomer youth as well as on those who are born here who are at risk of being marginalized. Engaging those who are marginalized is a very present and urgent matter for the communities we work with. And undertaking research to develop a framework for effective engagement that can be shared is an important endeavor. 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 (AP#6).

A cross-ministry coordinator from a provincial government agency praised our project that engages marginalized youth and involves dialogues around youth engagement through youth-centered participatory action research:

I am particularly pleased that the project has actively engaged vulnerable youth on the steering committee for this project. I appreciate this project’s efforts to initiate ongoing dialogues around youth engagement and youth-oriented participatory action research and the team’s leadership and commitment to the youth of our province. The educational, health and safety needs of all youth, including those who are urban-dwelling and marginalized, are important issues for us all (AP#11).

Advancing research into action: Knowledge translation and practical application. Our community partners have acknowledged implications of our project for knowledge translation and practical application to advance research into action, which was identified as another reason/motivation for their engagement with this project. This notion was nicely captured by an avid professional who work with hundreds of ethno-cultural youths:

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, or considering working with, youth in the community, and as a crucial next-step in advancing research into action (AP#8).

A community service coordinator from the municipal government stressed the importance of “usability” to have an impact on community practice and policy for better supporting youth by sharing youth-informed knowledge at a systems level:

Use of a participatory action framework in this project ensures active engagement of marginalized youth to give them a voice towards improving youth outcomes. 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 (AP#12).

She recognized the potential of our project to bring forward and mobilize the voice of youth into the transformation of policy, practice, and system, using a youth-guided participatory action framework. Also, comments were made by another community partner on the guiding research question of this project and its implication for mobilizing knowledge from research to support policy and programming, as another key motivation/incentive for partner engagement:

To examine the unfolding 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? Specifically, as it relates to youth in

high risk conditions can contribute to the knowledge transfer needed by government, especially, to support policy and programming that will have impact on youth with complex needs (AP#9).

Attractiveness to having an impact on policy and practice was echoed by an executive director of a community agency committed to ending homelessness, who appreciated “the use of a collaborative, participatory approach with youth and the focus on developing effective youth engagement strategies to inform policy and practice.” She stressed,

As an organization, we depend on community-based, participatory processes to develop strategies for addressing homelessness and related issues in our community. 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 (AP#5).

Furthermore, a senior 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.” She also emphasized the role of participatory action research in empowering youth and facilitating positive change and growth for youth:

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 (AP#13).

How Do We Engage?

As for the question of “how engage,” our community-based project uses the principles of participatory action research (PAR; i.e., mutual respect, co-learning, capacity-building, power-sharing, co-ownership of research, and commitment to social change) as an effective, coordinated way of engaging the team members (Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Simich, Waiter, Moorlag, & Ochocka, 2009; Stringer & Genat, 2004). In particular, our project involves the strategic use of a youth-guided/informed approach to youth engagement, while working with community agency partners. Our team’s youth leaders have been identified and recruited by our community agency partners that provide local youth programs. Our female and male youth leaders aged 16 to 24 (current $n = 12$) include Aboriginal and immigrant leaders. 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.

Our youth leaders have met over 130 times since October 2012. The structure of these regular meetings is youth-oriented, including youth-led ice-breaker activities, small working-group sessions, and all-inclusive dialogues (e.g., talking/sharing circles). One major outcome from those sessions was the youth-informed development of a framework of youth engagement, which has already been reported in an earlier manuscript elsewhere (Iwasaki, Springett, Dashora, McLaughlin, McHugh, & Youth4YEG Team, 2014). To plan for upcoming meetings, youth leaders took turns to attend planning meetings and set an agenda for a subsequent meeting. In between meetings, youth leaders were assigned to complete homework such as researching various approaches used by local youth agencies and preparing to contribute to a next session by responding to specific youth-engagement questions determined at a planning meeting. Once the framework of youth engagement was developed, this framework was pilot-tested through our youth leaders facilitating a series of engagement sessions (informed by the framework) with youth recruited locally. The learnings from this pilot framework-testing study have guided the planning and execution of the next phase of this overall research program that involves hosting a local youth forum (named “2K15 Youth4YEG Forum”) to inspire and work with youth to build tomorrow’s leaders, and building a youth-ally coalition to con-

solidate a large number of youth leaders and partners to collectively create a more effective change. *Youth-Oriented and Collaborative Research Processes*

Relevant to the question of “how engage,” our youth leaders noted that this is a youth-oriented and collaborative project, guided by the talents, expertise, and lived experiences of the youth leaders. The sub-themes within this broad theme include: (a) honoring youth voice: “bottom-up process for youth by youth”; (b) co-learning and teamwork; (c) being flexible/adaptable and strengths-based; and (d) creating a safe, comfortable, and fun space.

Honoring Youth Voice: “Bottom-up Process for Youth by Youth”

First, this project honors and highlights youth voice using a bottom-up process “for youth by youth,” as summarized by one youth leader: “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” (YL#1). Our youth leaders agreed that co-creating a framework for youth engagement was a youth-guided “rewarding” (YL#1) experience to incorporate their insights:

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 insight from many perspectives and fellow youth leaders’ personal experiences (YL#2).

Essentially, this framework development process was guided by youth’s lived experiences: “We have created the framework from nothing but our own life experiences” (YL#1). Through co-creating the framework, our youth leaders worked towards building a positive relationship while they appreciated being provided with a non-judgmental and non-threatening space to share their voices:

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 (YL#3).

Co-Learning and Teamwork

As acknowledged in the last quotes above, learning from each other (i.e., co-learning) was a major attractive process 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" (YL#4).

This youth leader further elaborated the benefit of co-learning and team work: "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" (YL#4). 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" (YL#3). Inspired by the desire to "bring about a positive change to the community" (YL#5), learning from peer youth leaders and participants was highlighted and appreciated by another youth leader: "Over the past year and several months of partaking in the group, I have learned so much from the youth participants and my peers" (YL#5).

This co-learning process involved learning about both benefits/opportunities and challenges of working collaboratively: "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" (YL#6). Our youth leaders came together by sharing a common interest in youth engagement and leadership, and community development: "Overall, I have had a good experience. I enjoyed meeting like-minded youth that were interested in leadership, working with youth, and making the community a better place" (YL#7). Another youth leader elaborated her passion and learning about the importance of communication, hard work, and helping others:

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 (YL#3).

Being Flexible/Adaptable and Strengths-Based

Once completing the lengthy co-creation of a framework for youth engagement for over six months, our youth leaders pilot-tested the framework by facilitating a series of youth engagement sessions (informed by the framework) with youth participants. Despite the challenge of recruiting "disengaged" 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 (YL#1).

Another youth leader elaborated further about the importance of being flexible through effective communication to build trust and structure:

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 (YL#7).

The strategic use of a strengths-based approach was another related process throughout our project. This process started with getting to know the talents and strengths of our youth leaders:

We started out by getting to know each other 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 (YL#1). Later on, during a pilot-test of our framework, our team purposefully relied on “youth leaders’ strengths to suggest potential activities to do with youth participants” (YL#2). Accordingly, the youth leaders planned to use a series of activities such as ice-breakers and art-based activities based on their skills and talents at engagement sessions with youth participants.

Creating a Safe, Comfortable, and Fun Space

One of the key factors for effective youth engagement was to create a safe, comfortable, and fun space during a pilot-test of the framework. One youth leader described,

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 (YL#4).

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” (YL#7).

Another essential factor for constructive and meaningful youth engagement involved the strategic use of “check-ins and check-outs” (YL#2). Each session always started with check-in to get to know where each participant is at and get them oriented to the session, and ended with check-out to share her/his feedback, including things they liked and areas for improvement to more effectively engage youth; conclude each session in a positive, encouraging way, by bringing everyone together on the same page; and make some plan for looking forward to a next session. This point was recognized by another youth leader:

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 (YL#4).

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 key theme identified regarding “how engage” was about both opportunities and challenges involving group dynamics that include the sub-themes of: (a) dealing with transformation; (b) relationship and trust-building; (c) diversity, size, and commitment of youth group; (d) power issues; and (e) structural barriers.

Dealing with Transformation

One key factor that worked well in the operation of youth leaders’ group was the way they dealt with the transformation of the group during the course of this multi-year project:

We handled the comings and goings at the transformations 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 (YL#4).

On the other hand, the challenges of maintaining our youth-oriented, collaborative research process were identified by our youth leaders.

Relationship and Trust-Building

In particular, building a trustful, positive relationship with youth was a major challenge in itself. The following comment by a youth leader demonstrated this relationship-building issue, which was described as “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 relationship with the youth for them to feel comfortable responding. Although our intentions were positive, I felt as though we were 'using' the youth for their answers in order to provide information to funders. While acknowledging that the financial side of this project is fundamental, I don't feel that it is fair for the funding to sway the research so directly. 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 (YL#4).

Despite our purposeful intention to bring forward the voices of our youth participants, asking sensitive questions such as poverty and homelessness in their lives might be judged as too intrusive if we failed to spend sufficient time to build a trustful relationship with them. It was echoed by another youth leader who was concerned about "some youth not feeling comfortable with what was to be carried out in sessions, when asking youth about sensitive issues such as homelessness without gaining their trust first" (YL#2). Although we hoped to provide youth-oriented opportunities to uncover voices of youth participants, it did not seem well received by both youth leaders and participants, as summarized by the following comment:

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 understood to some extent these concerns; however, 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 suggestions.... I liked that many of the youth participants who come to the meetings are consistent in attendance and they seem to enjoy the gatherings. I see this as some sort of achievement on our end that we were able to keep their interest (YL#5).

Rather than directly asking sensitive questions,

this youth leader was insightful to suggest using a more creative approach to engaging youth in conversation (e.g., short video-showing, art-based activities such as painting), while admitting that we were able to see consistent attendance by many youth participants in our sessions. A key lesson described by this youth leader's saying that "I wish we were more creative in finding ways to get certain conversations started," is extremely important as an essential reminder for our future work. This point was echoed by another youth leader's observation 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" (YL#6). This observation underlines a very important reminder about trust-building with you through investing "time and energy."

Nonetheless, it was encouraging to see youth leaders' observation about evidence of building a positive relationship with youth. One way of effective relationship-building was through the use of "debrief" within the youth leaders' group. It was described 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 is very helpful" (YL#4). The same youth leader stressed the importance of using an inclusive, mutually respectful approach: "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" (YL#4).

Another key factor for effective relationship- and trust-building involved the maintenance of accountability, as well as the importance of flexibility to understand the unpredictable nature of youth's lives:

Depending on what is feasible to the members of the new group, it would be a good idea to maintain some sort of accountability or stability in order to keep the process running smoothly. Ensuring that the members who are committing to the project remain engaged is important. Stability is one of the elements of our framework and it would be important to reflect that. Flexibility and understanding of the unpredictability in each of our lives and in the lives of the youth is also something we did well and should keep an open mind

about (YL#4).

Diversity, Size, and Commitment of Youth Group

As noted earlier, our research project strives to appreciate diversity within the youth population. Within the context of group dynamics, a youth leader commented on internal group structure:

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 not sure what to expect. 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 (YL#6).

Another youth leader further elaborated the complexity of the internal group structure, which made the process “interesting and frustrating yet rewarding”:

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 them 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 (YL#1).

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” (YL#2).

Another youth leader spoke of the benefit of having a more committed youth group to co-create a framework of youth engagement:

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 insight 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 (YL#4).

However, the challenging life situations of youth seem to make it very difficult to fully commit to a labor-intensive research project like 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 (YL#4).

Power Issues

Another significant factor for the research process described by our youth leaders was power issues. Our research project’s strategic focus on power sharing with youth was greatly appreciated and ensured innovation and uniqueness of the project, identified by a youth leader:

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 a unique research project (YL#4).

However, this type of funded research projects created other power issues, one of which concerned funding from 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” (YL#2).

Another related power issue was about ensuring that decisions made were in consultation with the group. A youth leader described this matter when the group had an option of inviting a provincial judge to one of the youth engagement sessions with high-risk youth:

It is important when dealing with this type of group that all decisions made are consulted with the group. For example, when the judge wanted to come, I think it was important that firstly the youth leaders have a say in whether or not that was okay and secondly that the youth have a say. If we are remaining true to our framework, we want this to be a safe and youth-led space so transparency is crucial (YL#4).

As emphasized by the above two quotes, “transparency” was identified as an important factor for mutually respectful relationship-building with youth. A comment was made to remind us of being 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 agency to make decisions about topics outside of our control (YL#6).

In spite of our conscious efforts to make the process more youth-guided, the complex power issues such as meeting the funders’ needs and university researchers’ positions/roles became a major challenge even unconsciously. The same youth leader voiced her uneasiness in expressing dissent and critique:

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 (YL#6).

This youth leader was insightful to suggest the use of conscious ongoing efforts and commitment to “an inclusive decision-making process” by respectfully engaging youth.

Structural Barriers

Apparently, these power issues are linked to structural barriers. The experiences from our research project uncovered structural factors that seemed to prevent many disadvantaged youth from continuing to involve in efforts to improve a support system for high-risk youth. Comments were made on perpetuating the societal/structural problems:

As the project moved forward, the frustrations of the group increased, because the purpose and intention of the project became muddled and unclear. The group also lost a few youth leaders who brought important perspectives. I believe this is an important piece to note. Although we (as youth leaders) got paid to attend, share our thoughts

and opinions, 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 or addressed but is important to note (YL#6).

This youth leader's critical observation that "not everyone has the same access to having a voice and being heard, regardless of the desire to participate" is extremely important, because this reality seems to be conditioned by the socio-economic, structural challenges that many of the high-risk youth face on a day-to-day basis.

Collaborative and Coordinated Process in an Iterative Way

Not only do the issues of group dynamics involve youth leaders, but these issues also involve the other community partners. Besides being guided/informed by our youth leaders, our project periodically engages our community and university partners to seek their professional and academic guidance on the process of our PAR project. This partner engagement provides opportunities for those community agency and university partners to give inputs on our youth-guided/informed process in order to ensure that the process implemented is meaningful and rigorous and has the potential of producing useful outcomes.

In fact, our community partners showed great appreciation for the use of a collaborative and coordinated process of the project that enables an iterative and evolving way of project planning and execution. The supervisor of a provincial government's high-risk youth division nicely articulated this notion:

I realize that uniqueness of this research involves the use of a 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 (AP#2).

Appreciation for "a stellar network of collaborators for this project" was further elaborated by another community partner since this network is essential to improving community practices:

Our partnership is well placed and a logical collaboration of agencies and institutions with the necessary skills and understanding to support the youth in exploring the identified issues and topics, while also learning about the best practices to engage youth more broadly. This network of partners has been working together for over 3 years to explore this research area. I congratulate the primary researcher in his effort to bring together a stellar network of collaborators for this project (AP#9).

The use of a collaborative and coordinated process in an inclusive and meaningful way was acknowledged by our community partners exemplified by the following comments by an executive director of a youth-serving agency:

We observed significant support from fellow community agencies at Youth4YEG meetings, which is a true barometer of the quality of work being undertaken by the team and its acceptance in the community. It is a pleasure to witness community organizations working in coordination with others in support of youth wellbeing, as we are continually being challenged with limited resources and ever-increasing youth needs. The research Youth4YEG is undertaking is significant in identifying how our

community can best serve a highly marginalized population in meaningful ways. Working alongside of organizations such as Youth4YEG has been an honor and we fully support their endeavors towards building an increasingly strong and dynamic young adult population for years to come (AP#10).

Within the context of limited resources and growing youth needs, the effective coordination of community resources in a more collaborative way is vital to support optimal youth development, as stressed by the above comment.

What Impacts Are We Having?

Finally, in terms of “impacts,” our PAR project has started to show tangible benefits for both community youth-serving agencies and youth themselves. They spoke about a number of benefits from this youth-oriented collaborative research, including: (a) capacity-building; (b) inspirational, meaningful youth engagement at a positive and safe space; (c) demonstrating positive youth outcomes; and (d) activating the voice of youth for social change.

Capacity Building

Evidently, our research project has had an impact on capacity building of youth-serving agencies, as well as capacity building of youth as observed by our community partners. A program evaluation coordinator of a largest youth-serving agency in the region appreciated insightful information on effective youth engagement approaches from the research. She also described her observation for positive impacts (e.g., skills and confidence) on youth leaders from her agency who have involved in the research:

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 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 (AP#1).

A coordinator of a high-risk youth unit at a provincial government agency admitted the benefits of co-learning, capacity building, and youth-guided knowledge mobilization:

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 (AP#2).

Specifically, one tangible impact in the community was the role of this research in building capacity of community agencies on effective youth engagement: “Continued exploration of the framework builds capacity for more agencies to understand how to engage youth more effectively” (AP#3).

A program evaluation director from a public school board concurred:

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 (AP#4).

The director of a government-funded community 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” (AP#5).

Also, this project's contributions to capacity-building and understanding of the complex lives of marginalized youth reached an immigrant-serving agency:

This project addresses an important need in relation to marginalized youth—some of whom come from immigrant or refugee backgrounds. 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 (AP#6).

Furthermore, a regional funding agency who oversees coordinated efforts to address complex community issues including poverty and education emphasized the importance of learning from marginalized youth and implementing research findings 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. There is a great deal of energy in our region right now to work together differently and in a much more coordinated fashion to promote better outcomes for youth. The timing for this research is terrific and we're thrilled to be part of it! (AP#7)

More tangibly, another multicultural community agency partner suggested creating a "youth council" for organizations, potentially guided by our research project to honor and incorporate youth perspectives into their practices:

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 (AP#8)?

Inspirational, Meaningful Youth Engagement at a Positive and Safe Space

Our community agency partners have had opportunities to witness the youth-informed process of our research and commended the provision of a positive, safe, and responsive space for meaningful and inspirational engagement with high-risk youth. For example, a director of a community youth-serving agency was impressed with the integrity of our research project, especially regarding its commitment to youth-oriented engagement:

As a community-based agency, we have been delighted to participate in their endeavors toward identifying meaningful youth engagement processes in our community. Youth4YEG provides opportunities for young individuals who are deemed at risk to engage in vital research and gain positive experiences in our community. We are very impressed with the integrity of Youth4YEG in a community climate that is experiencing ever increasing needs for youth engagement opportunities (AP#10).

Another comment was made by the principal of a local charter school that serves a large number of young people (14–19 years old) with high-risk life conditions (e.g., poverty, homelessness, abusive/addictive behaviors) who have previously experienced interruptions in their formal learning:

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 (AP#3).

In fact, several students from the school have become new members of our youth leader group and have started to make an important contribution to “inspiring today’s youth by creating community through relationships in a fun, inclusive environment to help youth achieve obtainable success” (i.e., new tentative mission of Youth4YEG).

Demonstration of Positive Youth Outcomes

Our community youth-serving agencies showed a keen interest in promoting positive outcomes for high-risk youth since they are accountable for having an impact on the community, especially on vulnerable population groups including high-risk youth and their families. For example, a community program coordinator who has known and worked with many of our youth leaders has already observed positive tangible outcomes, such as belongingness, confidence, and achievement: “This project has already improved many things for this group of marginalized youth including, but not limited to, a feeling of belonging, self-confidence, and achievement” (AP # 8). An executive director of a community agency spoke about empowered youth with pride:

In our time participating in the Youth4YEG project, we have observed a high quality of youth participation and research activity. YEG youth leaders communicated with a sense of empowerment and pride during activities and dialogues, which focused on vital youth engagement issues (AP#10).

A youth program coordinator of the same agency reiterated that our research “brought out a lot of strength and hope,” along with a meaningful relationship to promote a sense of belonging: “Relationship, youth want to make connection and community, desire to belong” (AP#10). A municipal government’s community coordinator enthusiastically mentioned the strengths of our project that “builds upon and enhances the capacity of youth to influence systems and services for the benefit of vulnerable youth and empower these youths to find their voice and to make a difference!” (AP#12).

An executive director of a local high-risk

youth agency convincingly suggested the use of a strengths-based approach to working with youth, as opposed to a deficit-based approach: “From a strengths-based approach, tapping into the strengths offers more empowerment than trying to tackle bringing the weakness up to the ‘do’ level” (AP # 9). The same community partner articulated the value of our project on youth engagement as a means of youth empowerment and community development:

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 YEG4Youth (AP#9).

Activating the Voice of Youth for Social Change

Indeed, a most innovative, unique aspect of our project observed by our community partners has been our strategic efforts to activate the voice of marginalized youth as the “driver” of the 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 (AP#9).

This community partner’s observation and suggestion for the use of this youth-guided approach are extremely important. To achieve this goal, building a meaningful relationship with youth is vital although the challenges of facilitating this process should be recognized as described earlier.

To reiterate these challenges, one community partner from a provincial government reminded of the importance of “non-judgmental” relationship-building with youth in response to our regular update on the project:

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 (AP#2).

Furthermore, the same community partner acknowledged that our research project is indeed an “anti-oppressive practice” in itself and that the project engages youth as key contributors/enablers to a social/system change:

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 (AP#2).

Regarding a system change, another partner from a largest regional youth-serving agency not only admitted the difficulty in letting go of agency control, but she also reminded of the need for a societal change:

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 helps us do that; this helps us change how we think of ourselves as a society (AP#1).

As acknowledged by this quote, our youth-informed framework of youth engagement has the potential of facilitating this social change as guided by youth.

Contextualized within a social change perspective, another key concept identified was about the role of youth leaders as a conduit for sourcing youth views on social justice issues:

“Youth4YEG should be the mechanism by which anyone who is interested in youth research connects to, and the youth leaders are the conduit for sourcing/researching youth views on current social justice issues” (AP # 9). Broadly, our research project addresses significant social justice issues that influence youth (including youth with high-risk conditions/behaviors), as a youth-oriented way of activating the voice of youth and mobilizing youth and community partners into action for social change. An avid community partner described her experiences in involving in our research project for over three and a half years, as an “amazing journey”:

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, for 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 background 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! (AP#1).

We have already witnessed some tangible milestones exemplified by these positive remarks on changes/transformations of youth and community partners who have been inspired by this project.

Brief Remarks by University Investigators

This PAR project has started strategically to centerpiece the contributions of youth leaders and community agency partners to the planning and implementation of our research; thus, university researchers have primarily played a background role. This background, supportive role has included university researchers’ contributions to securing research funding and other resources (e.g., the use of university facilities for meetings and youth engagement activities), offering theoretical (e.g., youth and poverty, youth and homelessness, cross-cultural issues) and methodological (i.e., PAR and qualitative research) expertise, and reminding the team members of the PAR principles and rigor and impact of

research (e.g., capacity-building, knowledge mobilization).

Briefly, I share some reflective statements by university researchers (UR) on our PAR project (their identifications being coded as UR#1 to #4 below). First, those academic investigators are conscious of the use of terminologies that may stigmatize or marginalize our target population. For example, one university researcher noted, “I wondered about the term ‘high risk’ and I know it is common in the literature but I wonder if we might consider at least acknowledging that this term can be marginalizing in itself” (UR#1). In fact, the literature cautions the use of these terminologies (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Caine & Boydell, 2010; Cammarota, 2011).

Another university investigator was critical about the use of term, “giving voice” to youth:

I am a bit apprehensive about using the word ‘giving voice’ because this almost implies that we have the power to give. They [Youth] indeed have their own voice—we haven’t given it to them—we have just highlighted them. I am wondering if we can just write ‘highlighting youth voice’ or ‘supporting youth voice’ (UR #2).

This researcher’s point is in line with “power issues” described earlier. Still, another academic researcher with extensive experiences in PAR reflected on the significance of “time and relationship,” within the context of youth’s challenging lives:

What strikes me most is the importance of time and relationship—this comes up again and again and tends to be in the background rather than the foreground. Here time had its pros and cons. Time was needed for the engagement process but was limited by structural constraints with respect to funding, but time also meant in the chaotic lives of youth that some were lost. Time also means they grow up and move on and new young people need to be engaged. The other issue is that we focused on youth who already had leadership skills and this, if you like, was an asset, which may not be found elsewhere—i.e., there were preconditions to a successful process (UR#3). Importantly, she highlighted multi-dimen-

sionality of time as the basic for engagement at structural, transitional, and developmental levels, as well as the issue of “preconditions” to a successful engagement process (specifically, speaking about leadership skills of youth in this project).

Furthermore, another university researcher’s observation focused on a transformational process of our youth leaders with respect to power dynamics, which portrays the challenge of ensuring the research process to be truly youth-led:

It occurs to me that what the youth may be experiencing, as they begin to question how truly youth led the process was, was a bit of the transformation. The power dynamic must shift as the youth gain experience and confidence with each other and with the process, and begin to assert themselves more. It seems that until that point it would be difficult to be fully youth led. It is great to be able to see this “process” in the data (UR #4).

Overall, as the principal investigator of this project, I learned about the opportunities and challenges of using youth leadership (especially, the role of our youth leaders) in community-based PAR through working with cross-sectoral community partners to inspire and engage broader youth groups in a constructive, meaningful way and help them become capable, contributive members of our society. It is encouraging to see impacts of our project reported in this paper; yet, efforts should continue to achieve the goal of transforming a system to more effectively support youth (especially, youth with high-risk conditions/behaviors) and meet their diverse needs.

Conclusion

This paper described the reflective experiences of our PAR team members, contextualized within the theme of the 15th Annual ESC Conference, namely, “Engaging for Change: Changing for Engagement.” I believe that these reflective accounts of my research partners effectively portrayed the incentives for, processes of, and outcomes from our youth engagement research project, which were matched nicely with the sub-themes of the conference: (a) Why engage?, (b) how do we engage?, and (c) what impacts are we having? Broadly, “engagement” is a core activity of our project to facilitate “change” and transformation at personal, social, and system

levels, which, once again, reiterate the significance of the overall theme of the ESC conference.

Recently, Speer and Christens (2013) spoke about “strategic engagement” to develop “social power” to promote change in communities. In particular, strategic engagement gives attention to the role of power in community decision-making in order to enhance community capacity and impact including the transformation of policy and practice. Strategic engagement “democratizes the research process” to build social power with the aim of making change and improving social conditions. A key factor for achieving this goal, however, includes long-term relationship-building with “powerful” community partners who are “attentive to social power dynamics in community decision-making and capable of mobilizing their fellow citizens to influence these processes” (Speer & Christens, 2013, p. 743). I believe that our PAR project reported in this paper has provided convincing tangible illustrations for supporting/echoing the significance of strategic engagement, by focusing on the use of “strategic youth and partner engagement.” Importantly, this strategic engagement centerpieces the voices and talents of our youth leaders, supported by our community agency partners, along with a background role of university researchers.

Essentially, facilitating engagement, development, and well-being of high-risk, marginalized youth is a shared responsibility across all systems and sectors (Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Zahradnik, Stewart, O'Connor, Stevens, Ungar, & Wekerle, 2010) to promote practice, policy, and social changes and improve a support system for high-risk youth and their families/care-takers (Gemert et al., 2008; Zahradnik et al., 2010). Further efforts are required to more effectively address these needs for transformational changes that are identified as a significant gap in research (Abela & Hankin, 2008; Caine & Boydell, 2010; Curran, Bowness, & Comack, 2010; Lynam & Cowley, 2007; Wearing, 2011), by using a youth- and community-oriented engagement approach in an inclusive, collaborative way. Undoubtedly, engagement plays a key role in this change-inducing process and vice versa (i.e., in turn, change can induce/promote further engagement) in a dynamic and sustainable way.

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About the Author

Yoshitaka Iwasaki is professor and associate dean for research in the Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.