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Insights on Inspirational Education for "High-Risk" Youth Informed by Participatory Action Research (PAR) on Youth Engagement: Short Communication

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Abstract

This short communication provides our insights into how or in what ways educators can more effectively support aspiration of at-risk/high-risk youth toward meaningful education. These are informed by the key learnings from our ongoing youth engagement research. Those insights emphasize the importance of *meaningful engagement of youth* through building a positive relationship with youth from a strengths-based perspective to mobilize youth's talents into our collaborative engagement efforts in order to effectively support "high-risk" youth and aspire their educational pathways. Conceptually, our work aligns with the paradigms of positive youth development (PYD) and social justice youth development (SJYD). Practically, our research project represents an "anti-oppressive practice" in itself because the project engages youth as important contributors to a social/system change, especially, the role of our youth leaders in our team as a conduit for mobilizing youth views and actions on social justice issues (e.g., oppression, marginalization, social exclusion/inclusion, human rights, empowerment).

Keywords: youth, at risk, high risk, engagement, education

Historically, the education field has struggled to provide a meaningful learner-centered structure for promoting optimal learning of youth/young people who are at-risk or high-risk of a multitude of life challenges, such as poverty, homelessness, marginalization, social exclusion, and mental health issues (Chapman, Laird, Ifill, & Kewal Ramani, 2011; Morton, 2016; Tilleczek & Ferguson, 2013). A key factor to facilitate a positive transformation of its structure seems to be meaningful *engagement* of "at-risk/high-risk" youth within their lives including their educational domain (DeLuca, Godden, Hutchinson, & Versnel, 2015; Jones, 2011; Naccarato, Brophy, & LaClair, 2013; Slatena, Riverab, Shemwellc, & Elison, 2016). The purpose of this *short communication* is to provide insights into how or in what ways educators can more effectively support aspiration of at-risk/high-risk youth toward meaningful education through youth engagement. These insights are based on our team's ongoing participatory action research (PAR) project on youth engagement. Following a brief description of such PAR project, we will offer recommendations informed by the project.

1. Youth Engagement Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project

Since October 2012, our Youth4YEG team based in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta, Canada, has been using youth-centered engagement and leadership approaches.[1] These approaches involve youth-guided participatory action research (PAR) to ensure mutual respect, co-learning, relationship-building, power-sharing, empowerment, capacity-building, and collective commitment to social change (Bocci, 2016; Gomez & Ryan, 2016; Ozer, 2016). Importantly, our culturally diverse youth leaders have been co-drivers/co-researchers to guide the trajectory of our project. As constructed by those youth leaders, "our vision is to work together towards building the

[1]YEG stands for the code of the Edmonton International Airport, Alberta, Canada.

foundation and platform for a supportive and equitable society for all youth to inspire and prosper through mutual learning and capacity-building." Our bi-weekly youth engagement and leadership sessions involve diverse youth leaders including Aboriginal, immigrant, and street-involved youth to transcend cultural and socio-economic boundaries with the common vision described above for the collective benefit of our youth in our community. This project purposefully provides a safe, non-judgmental, and mutually respectful space for our youth leaders to work together toward the common goal of improving support for high-risk youth to meet their unique needs in a meaningful youth-friendly/youth-centered way.

A most innovative, unique aspect of our research involves the strategic use of "youth leadership," especially through the leadership/mentorship of our youth leaders to engage, inspire, and support youth with high-risk conditions for their pursuits of a more positive, constructive, and meaningful life. Besides facilitating positive change and transformation at a personal level (e.g., self-identity, self-confidence), our project appreciates and incorporates the proactive role of youth in promoting social (e.g., advocacy for youth rights) and system (e.g., community practice and policy) changes. So far, over 250 youth leaders' meetings have been held at a safe, respectful, and youth-oriented space in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta.

The milestones of our project include: (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 high-risk, marginalized youth; and (c) hosting of a local youth conference named "2K15 Youth4YEG Forum" co-sponsored with a charter high school 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).

More recently, our Youth4YEG team has completed planning for youth-led fall and winter activities in 2015-16. The team has collectively identified two primary foci of these activities, namely, "poverty" and "identity" issues contextualized broadly within youth's lives. In particular, in the fall of 2015 and winter of 2016, our Youth4YEG team has addressed poverty and identity-related issues by engaging Edmonton youth to collect data from youth themselves and at community agencies and educational institutions (e.g., high school, university) in Edmonton, Alberta through a series of dialogue sessions (via surveys, interviews, and focus groups) and the use of youth-oriented creative activities (e.g., video-recording). Specifically, our youth leaders' team has been divided into four research groups based on these leaders' preferences to conduct a case study with youth target populations identified (e.g., homeless youth, immigrant and refugee youth). Each research group got together between meetings to work on case studies, and each bi-weekly meeting involved update and discussion on ongoing research activities. Specifically, at the meetings, each research group shared what they are doing and what they have accomplished, and sought feedback and suggestion from fellow youth leaders on their research processes and outcomes.

For example, one group has completed a case study on a river-valley tent community, which is a collection of homesteads developed by homeless youth. A participant-observation approach, through which a youth leader from our team had been part of this community, was used to describe the structure and operation of this tent community. This case study found that the youth have created a sense of community within the river valley that involves cooperation, leadership, and sense of ownership. The community members have collectively created 'clans' where each member is responsible for specific tasks mostly around survival (e.g., gathering food, medical care, and other survival necessities). Another group has conducted a case study using interviews and videos to explore identity-related issues, transitions from original home countries, and other issues important for immigrant and refugee youth at a homework club within an intercultural centre. The findings suggest that newcomer youth's lives are culturally grounded and nourished by a sense of community through religious affiliations and residential neighbourhoods with similar cultural backgrounds, while emphasizing the importance of building intercultural relationships to facilitate inclusion and integration into the Canadian society.

In addition, another case study surveyed both university students and street-involved youth using questionnaires to examine perceptions on rewards using a variety of scenarios. A major finding is that it is inappropriate to judge young people based on whether youth are street-involved or university students. Essentially, the findings support the fundamental human characteristics such as kindness, compassion, and humanity, all of which are valued by both university students and street involved youth. However, due to the challenges of the necessity to meet the survival needs of street-involved youth, they are often disadvantaged, compared to university students, in terms of educational, employment, and other life opportunities. Consequently, street-involved youth's responses focus more on meeting the immediate survival needs, as opposed to long-term human growth needs. Implications of the findings speak to the importance of being non-judgmental to street-involved youth, as well as of providing meaningful opportunities through constructive youth engagement.

Furthermore, another group studied homeless youth and categorized their responses to questions about the lives of homeless youth in Edmonton, based on the length of homelessness — short-term, medium-term, and chronic homeless. Those responses/direct quotes described in each of the index cards suggest that access to services and skills related to homelessness reflect/depict the length of homelessness, meaning that the longer the length of homelessness, the more frequent their access to services, and the more extensive life skills necessary to survive. Overall, the participants' voices and stories help depict the real lived experiences of homeless youth, including both challenges and opportunities related to socio-economic-cultural, employment, educational, and life issues (e.g., risky behaviours, mental health). Also, accessing to comfortable and safe places to sleep was found very important, as described by a video with these youths. To echo these findings, another group videotaped conversations with attendees of a city-wide homeless-connect conference. The data in this case study were collected not only from youth (including homeless youth themselves), but also from staff at community youth agencies. A key finding of this case study was about the importance of enhancing access to available services for housing, health, recreation, and daily essentials in a more community-wide, coordinated, and user-friendly way.

Each research group then presented their case studies both internally and externally. Not only each group shared their research at a regular team meeting internally, but a community forum including a more synthesized presentation was held with our community and university partners within our broader team to share and showcase our achievements and seek those partners' feedback on these.

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

Furthermore, a number of community youth-serving agencies have recognized our research and contacted us to seek our expertise in youth engagement through inviting us to provide recommendations on their youth engagement initiatives and to even facilitate engagement activities or run youth-engagement workshops. For example, our team has supported those community agencies for their youth engagement efforts as an invited consultant/advisor, while we have facilitated a series of engagement activities with group-home youth through check-in, ice-breaker activities, story sharing, goal-setting, dialogues on youth issues, check-out, etc. These opportunities provide a safe, enjoyable, and youth-centered space to promote relationship/trust-building and co-learning, and address (via dialogues) life issues that are important for high-risk youth, including those who live at group homes, such as harm reduction, conflict resolution, and life skill development. As another example, our consultation role has included our guidance on the establishment and operation of a youth council or youth leader group at a community organization, informed by our extensive experience in mobilizing the talents of our youth leaders into positive changes both personally and socially. More recently, our team has facilitated workshops customized to support youth-liaison initiatives of one of the largest city-wide community agencies. Moreover, our team has occasionally presented our research processes and outcomes at academic and professional conferences, including invited presentations for governmental organizations. Overall, our consultation role has encompassed cross-sectorally supporting government and non-profit community agencies. Currently, our team is in the process of planning and implementing a new phase of research to continue to have an impact on community practice around youth engagement.

2. Implications for Supporting "High-risk" Youth's Educational Aspiration

Next, we would like to provide insights into how or in what ways educators can more effectively support aspiration of at-risk/high-risk youth toward meaningful education. These are informed by the key learnings from our youth engagement research (briefly described above), which started in October 2012.

- *Meaningful engagement* of youth is vital for our collaborative efforts to support "high-risk" youth and aspire their educational pathways.

Overall, we have the responsibility to respectfully meet the educational needs of youth through meaningfully engaging them in our collective efforts toward mobilizing their pathways toward successful lives not only educationally but also as individuals in our society. But, we should do more than just offering a lip-service superficially. Rather, we should be fully committed to respectfully engage youth, work with them, and deliver truly youth-centered high-quality education and service for diverse youth populations. For this purpose, meaningful engagement of youth is essential as supported by earlier research (e.g., Bradera & Luke 2013; Karger & Currie-Rubin, 2013; Larrier et al., 2016; Naccarroto et al., 2013; Pariser, Castro, & Lalonde, 2016). For instance, Karger and Currie-Rubin (2013) emphasized that an important factor contributing to the successful reintegration of incarcerated youth into school and the community is to *engage*

these youth in meaningful ways in the learning process, including ongoing assessment of their own learning and their engagement in addressing real-world problems/issues.

Based on our research, our framework of youth engagement developed by our youth leaders over 6 months seems very useful to apply to educational practice and policy in order to promote effective engagement of high-risk youth. This youth-oriented framework consists of 3 major elements of Basis, What, and How, including 9 key components: (1) Empowerment, (2) Opportunity, (3) Learning, and (4) Community (Basis); (5) Relationships, (6) Stability, and (7) Achievements (What/Goals); (8) Communication, and (9) Activities (How) (see Iwasaki, Springett et al., 2014 for details). Unlike conventional youth engagement models, this framework has been developed by integrating the lived experiences, talents, and creativity of our youth leaders, proving its relevance and value to youth themselves. Such relevance and value have been shown and supported by our research, including our testing and application of this framework to address specific youth issues (e.g., youth homelessness, poverty, identity, empowerment, co-learning, capacity-building) through meaningful youth-led/guided engagement with high-risk youth.

- A most important factor for effective youth engagement is to build a positive, meaningful *relationship* with youth, which is one of the key dimensions of our youth engagement framework.

In particular, genuinely showing *respect* toward youth is essential to build a positive relationship with youth and facilitate effective engagement of youth. Again, a superficial lip-service does not work — showing a genuine respect toward youth to build a good relationship with them involves the use of youth-centered communication and engagement techniques based on the principle of dignity and respect toward humanity. Any single individual, regardless of differences in personal backgrounds and characteristics, has unique talents. Respect from youth is gained through showing and communicating sincere and genuine appreciation for humanity.

Another related key factor for building a positive relationship with youth is the importance of being *non-judgmental*. Indeed, being non-judgmental is critical to associate with youth at where youth is. For many "high-risk" youth, being judged based on how they look, behave, or present themselves is often done in a negative, non-respectful way prematurely. Again, based on the principle of dignity and respect toward humanity, we should avoid making a premature superficial judgment about each youth — through showing and communicating sincere and genuine appreciation for humanity, we can more holistically recognize precious human qualities of each youth from a talents/strengths-based perspective.

Also, *peer-based support* is a great resource to facilitate positive youth engagement and development. In particular, the use of youth leaders and mentors is essential to inspire and support high-risk youth, because those youth leaders/mentors are seen as role models. Indeed, our research is based on the premise that our youth leaders in our team act as co-researchers and co-drivers of the project to guide and navigate the pathways toward more effective youth engagement and its positive impacts at personal, social, and societal/system levels. Those youth leaders belong to their respective youth culture or a community of youth — they are trusted leaders and role models for many of young people in their community/culture.

Speaking of relationship-building, it is important to give attention to very sensitive *power issues* considering the positions of individuals (e.g., government staff, agency staff, teachers, case workers) within a structural context. Mutually respectful and non-judgmental relationship-building efforts as noted above can ease power-based barriers. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of individuals working within such a structure (e.g., government, agency) to minimize (and, hopefully, eliminate) power imbalance. Rather, their responsibility includes power-sharing and co-learning with youth to promote sense of ownership and empowerment within youth. Specifically, actively engaging youth in addressing issues that influence their own lives is extremely important. This youth engagement process should include power sharing and co-learning with youth to engage youth in decision-making about strategies and solutions to address matters that affect their lives (e.g., issues about schooling such as high-school drop-outs). Importantly, we should appreciate, learn from, and integrate the voices, lived experiences, and talents of youth into these engagement and decision-making processes. Such meaningful engagement and youth-guided decision-making processes can generate youth-centered effective solutions to deal with societal challenges experienced by youth, including those related to educational issues.

Bradera and Luke's (2013) 3-year case study of alternative assessment in flexible learning centres for youth who have left formal schooling in Queensland, Australia, has shown the importance of *relationship-building* with marginalized youth experimenting with digital music production to re-engage and extend their participation.

- The use of a *strengths-based approach* is important by identifying and incorporating youth's talents into youth engagement efforts.

On the contrary, a deficit-based approach to trying to "fix" youth as a problem is detrimental to effective youth engagement and development. Rather, we have the responsibility to respectfully engage and work with youth in order to provide meaningful opportunities for identifying/discovering and using/further strengthening the talents of each youth. The importance of using a strengths-based approach has been identified within: (a) a constructivist-based instructional approach to promote and support more engaged learning with at-risk high school students (Larrier et al., 2016), (b) a mobile media art curriculum for engaging at-risk students with their schooling and with civic engagement (Pariser et al., 2016), and (c) the application of an educational framework Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to transform education that is provided to incarcerated youth by emphasizing meaningful engagement of these youth (Karger & Currie-Rubin, 2013).

Related to a strengths-based approach, a *harm reduction* approach has been shown to be effective to work with high-risk youth (Cheng, Wood et al., 2015; Olate, Salas-Wright et al., 2015; Parker, Luther, & Murphy, 2007; Petrosino, Campie et al., 2015). This harm reduction approach focuses on enabling/empowering youth to actively take an initiative and personal control to make positive, less harmful decisions for their daily activities. The harm reduction approach facilitates healthier and more constructive and meaningful living through the reduction of harms that can accompany substance use and other risky behaviours (e.g., sharing of needles, unprotected sex, self-harm, suicidal attempt, etc.). This is a humanistic, strengths-based approach by emphasizing the active role of individuals to make positive, less harmful decisions in their daily living, thereby empowering youth.

Eventually, it is important to remind us that even a small baby step can be a great achievement, such as seeing a sign of openness of youth, a casual positive conversation with youth, or a small improvement in youth behaviour. Overtime, these baby steps can be accumulated into significant milestones.

Another key related reminder is the importance of being patient, open-minded, and flexible, considering challenging and unstable nature of the lives of high-risk youth. Despite these challenges, the use of the above recommendation seems to provide positive and hopeful opportunities to facilitate effective engagement and development of high-risk youth. Our future replies on the leadership of our youth as each of us can make a positive impact on engaging and working with these talented young people in mutually respectful and meaningful ways.

3. Concluding Remarks

Overall, our research project has demonstrated the utility of participatory action research (PAR) to address social issues that are important for youth, especially, for "at-risk/high-risk" youth, including education-related issues — as also shown by others, for example, on theoretical (i.e., developmental and equity perspectives) and methodological issues about youth-led participatory action research (YPAR; Ozer, 2016), YPAR with homeless youth as peer researchers (Gomez & Ryan, 2016), as well as a social justice-oriented approach to service-learning practice using youth-engaged PAR (Bocci, 2016). In summary, our insights described in this short communication emphasize the importance of *meaningful engagement of youth* through building a positive relationship with youth from a strengths-based perspective to mobilize youth's talents into our collaborative engagement efforts in order to effectively support "high-risk" youth and aspire their educational pathways.

Finally, our research project is indeed an "anti-oppressive practice" in itself because the project engages youth as important contributors to a social/system change, especially, the role of our youth leaders as a conduit for advancing youth views and actions on social justice issues (e.g., oppression, marginalization, social exclusion/inclusion, human rights, empowerment). In particular, our youth-developed/informed framework of youth engagement has the potential of facilitating this social/system change by addressing social justice issues, as guided by youth themselves, through working alongside with youth allies, including youth-serving agencies and interdisciplinary academic scholars. Overall, our research uses a youth-oriented way of activating the voices and talents of youth and mobilizing youth and youth allies into actions for social changes.

For these notes, we must remind the reader that conceptually our work is in line/alignment with the paradigms of positive youth development (PYD; Commission on Positive Youth Development, 2005; Geldhof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013) and social justice youth development (SJYD; Cammarota, 2011; Gharabaghi & Anderson-Nathe, 2012; Ross, 2011). Briefly, the PYD framework illustrates how the promotion of competencies at both individual and system levels leads to desired youth development outcomes, while the SJYD paradigm involves youth's awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity, and the engagement in social justice activities that counter oppressive conditions. Indeed, a previous paper reported that meaningful youth engagement facilitated by youth leadership was highlighted as a key mechanism for PYD and SJYD, demonstrated by our PAR project (Iwasaki, 2016). As noted by Slaten et al. (2016), however, our research represents "only one intervention study in the peer-reviewed literature utilizing the SJYD paradigm" (p. 131). Importantly, the integration of PYD and SJYD (Cammarota, 2011; Iwasaki, 2016; Ross, 2011) conceptually supports the vital role of youth as a proactive agent for changes at personal

(e.g., self-identity, constructive behaviours), social (e.g., advocacy for social change), and community (e.g., policy and practice change from social justice perspectives) levels.

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