

Understanding the impact of youth engagement on positive youth development

by

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Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

- a. human research ethics approval from the Simon Fraser University Office of Research Ethics

or

- b. advance approval of the animal care protocol from the University Animal Care Committee of Simon Fraser University

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Abstract

Young people are increasingly becoming involved in developing services designed for them. While much has been researched about youth engagement best practices and organizational benefits, there has been little focus on how youth engagement initiatives benefit the well-being of involved youth. This Capstone research seeks to understand how youth engagement initiatives can promote youth well-being using the Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework within a Canadian context. This framework is composed of 6 constructs that promote positive developmental pathways for youth: 1) competence; 2) caring; 3) confidence; 4) connection; 5) character; and 6) contribution. A systematic search and review were conducted, and 35 articles were analyzed to assess the impact of youth engagement initiatives on these 6 constructs. Multiple elements of youth engagement initiatives were associated with positive short- and long-term outcomes for involved youth across various domains. Recommendations are made for how to integrate these practices into new or existing youth engagement initiatives to best promote youth well-being.

Keywords: youth engagement; positive youth development; well-being

Dedication

This project is dedicated to the BounceBack® Youth team at CMHA-BC Division and BounceBack®'s Youth Advisory Committee members, past and present. Thank you bringing your passion, creativity and knowledge to this work, and for your dedication to improving youth mental health outcomes across BC and beyond. You inspire me every day, and I am so grateful and humbled by the opportunity to work with each and every one of you.

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List of Acronyms

YAC	Youth Advisory Committee
PYD	Positive Youth Development
6 Cs	Competence, Caring, Confidence, Connection, Character, Contribution
GPA	Grade Point Average

1. Introduction

There is a growing focus in the public health field to build sustainable programs that meet the needs of their participants and fit within the community context. This requires a shift away from traditional power dynamics and a renewed focus on moving forward together by working with populations who have traditionally been excluded from program or service design. Youth and young people, defined in this review as being between ages 15-24, are increasingly relied upon as crucial partners in the development of youth-oriented programs and services through youth engagement initiatives; this all-encompassing term refers to programs that work with youth to address the issues impacting young people in their communities (United Nations, 2019; Dunne et al., 2017). These initiatives aim to bring youth voices into the conversation, which in turn creates better youth-oriented services by building relevance for youth and addressing potential obstacles in accessing or completing programs (de Matos & Simões, 2016; Montague & Eiroa Orosa, 2017).

‘Youth engagement and empowerment’ was recently identified as one of six key themes emerging from the Lancet Commission on Adolescent Health and Well-Being (Frasquilho et al., 2018). Much of the research in youth engagement literature is focused on how youth engagement initiatives benefit organizations and communities. This Capstone research seeks to understand how youth engagement initiatives benefit young people by creating conditions for Positive Youth Development (PYD). Throughout this review, themes of equity will be interwoven to underscore how youth engagement initiatives can promote positive outcomes for all youth.

1.1 Background: Engaging Canadian Youth

Canadian youth are eager to get involved. A 2013 Statistics Canada survey found that when compared to all other age groups, Canadian youth ages 15-24 were most likely to volunteer (53% volunteered) (Shodjaee-Zrudlo & Farahmandpour, 2017). Youth engagement initiatives are mutually reinforcing in that the engaged youth and

the community grow alongside one another; because of this, community engagement has been identified as a key feature of Positive Youth Development (Ramey et al., 2018; Shodjaee-Zrudlo & Farahmandpour, 2017). As described below, when opportunities are created for youth to become involved in their communities, youth, communities, and organizations benefit.

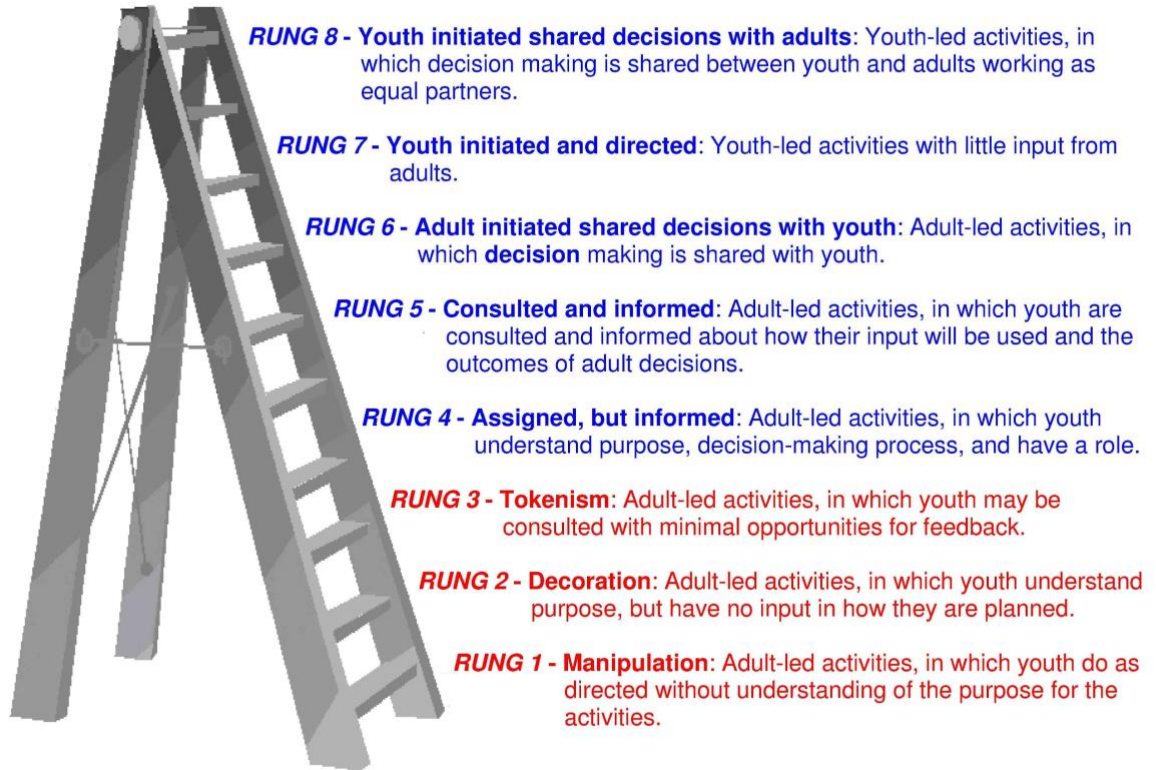
1.2 Youth Engagement Initiatives

Youth engagement initiatives encompass a range of participatory, community-based approaches where youth and adults co-create research, programs or services together, sharing power, knowledge, and responsibility. Empowerment of youth underlies engagement initiatives; grounded in a foundation of shared leadership, engagement initiatives foster empowerment by building efficacy and motivation in youth to think and act independently (Anderson & Sandmann, 2009). This type of approach is commonly used when working with communities who have historically been marginalized; traditionally, youth have been excluded from the design of youth-oriented programs and services (Renwick et al., 2019). In a youth context, this is most often known as Youth-Led Participatory Action Research (YPAR), a process where youth design and conduct research with adult collaboration and support (Frasquilho et al., 2018). The goal of YPAR is to develop leadership skills, knowledge around the issues affecting youth, and empowering youth to become advocates for change in their communities (Frasquilho et al., 2018). Through this process, communities are strengthened, and research and/or resources are developed to promote the health and well-being of wider populations (Frasquilho et al., 2018). Youth engagement initiatives and YPAR occur along a continuum of engagement levels; one way to measure this is using Hart's Ladder (see Figure 1). Non-participation occurs at levels 1-3; rungs 4-5 represent increasing levels of youth engagement and increased power sharing between adults and youth.

Figure 1

*Hart's Ladder of Participation*¹

ROGER HART'S LADDER OF PARTICIPATION



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, as cited in www.freechild.org/ladder.htm

Engaged youth may view themselves as both the developers and recipients of services and programs (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). This emphasizes the participatory nature of this work, where youth often play a dual role as both agents of change and as research participants (Canas et al., 2019). The long-term goal of YPAR is to affect broader social change in the social inequities and health disparities affecting youth (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). This process is facilitated by youth development, which builds the intermediate outcomes forming the foundation for community-wide, long-term impacts (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). There is growing evidence that YPAR

¹ Youth Power. (n.d.) Three models to consider when integrating youth participation into programs.

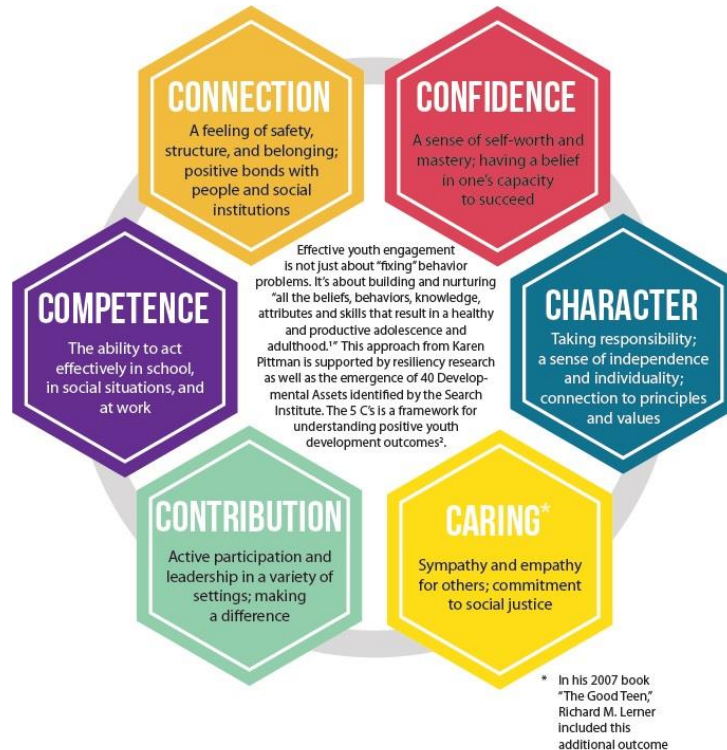
promotes skill development that is critical to positive youth development (Frasquilho et al., 2018).

1.3 Positive Youth Development

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) framework, developed in the early 1990s, made an intentional shift towards a strengths-based approach, focusing the strengths, resources, and experiences that are critical for youth to thrive (Soares et al., 2019). Youth development is viewed as a function of a young person's strengths and the capacity of their surrounding settings to promote positive outcomes (Frasquilho et al., 2018). All youth are viewed as having the inherent ability to actively engage with and change their communities; in turn, this promotes positive personal development (Frasquilho et al., 2018).

Figure 2

Positive Youth Development Framework²



Development occurs along 6 constructs (the 6 Cs) within the PYD framework: confidence, character, caring, contribution, competence, and connection (Frasquilho et al., 2018). The sixth construct of 'Caring' was identified and added to the framework in 2007 by Richard M. Lerner, one of the creators of the PYD framework (Pederson, 2018). Development along these constructs is facilitated by external and internal Developmental Assets. External asset categories include Support, Empowerment, Boundaries and Expectations, and Constructive Use of Time (Nakkula et al., 2010). Commitment to Learning, Positive Values, Social Competencies, and Positive Identity represent the internal asset categories (Nakkula et al., 2010). The more developmental assets a youth has, the more likely they are to thrive (Lerner et al., 2006). The guiding hypothesis behind this framework is that if young people grow within a supportive context and are supported by developmental assets, they will thrive and develop skills

² Pederson, S. (2018). The 5 C's of Positive Youth Development.

along the 6 Cs linked to positive developmental trajectories and long-term outcomes (Lerner et al., 2006). This review seeks to explore the question: how do youth engagement initiatives promote the development of the 6 Cs in a Canadian context? The primary objective of this review is to provide recommendations for practice to promote positive youth development through youth engagement initiatives.

2. Methods

2.1 Study Design

A rapid review was conducted to explore how youth engagement initiatives promote positive youth development. This approach utilizes systematic review methods to find and critically appraise existing research and explore broad questions about a policy issue, focusing on the overall direction of the literature as a whole (Grant & Booth, 2009).

2.2 Inclusion Criteria

Both qualitative and quantitative studies, reviews and reports of interventions that assessed the impact of youth engagement on one or more measures of positive youth development were included. Youth engagement initiatives consisted of any activity involving a sustained connection between youth and an organization in a volunteer role, where youth are meaningfully contributing to organizational goals and activities. Youth were defined as being between the ages of 15-24, consistent with the United Nations definition of 'youth' (United Nations, 2019).

2.3 Exclusion Criteria

Studies that were published prior to 2000 or were not available in the English language were excluded. A 20-year review period was selected due to the significant changes experienced by youth born after 2000, who have never known life before the Internet (Turner, 2015).

2.4 Search Strategy

An initial search was conducted in December 2019 of the PsycInfo database for scholarly articles published within the last 20 years using the MeSH terms:

(youth OR adolescents OR young people OR young adults) AND
(community engagement OR youth engagement OR community involvement)
paired with each of

(well-being OR happiness OR life satisfaction OR quality of life) OR
(positive youth development)

Papers were screened for duplication, adherence to the target population, a focus on youth engagement and assessment of at least one construct of positive youth development. Only studies that met all eligibility criteria were included in this review.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

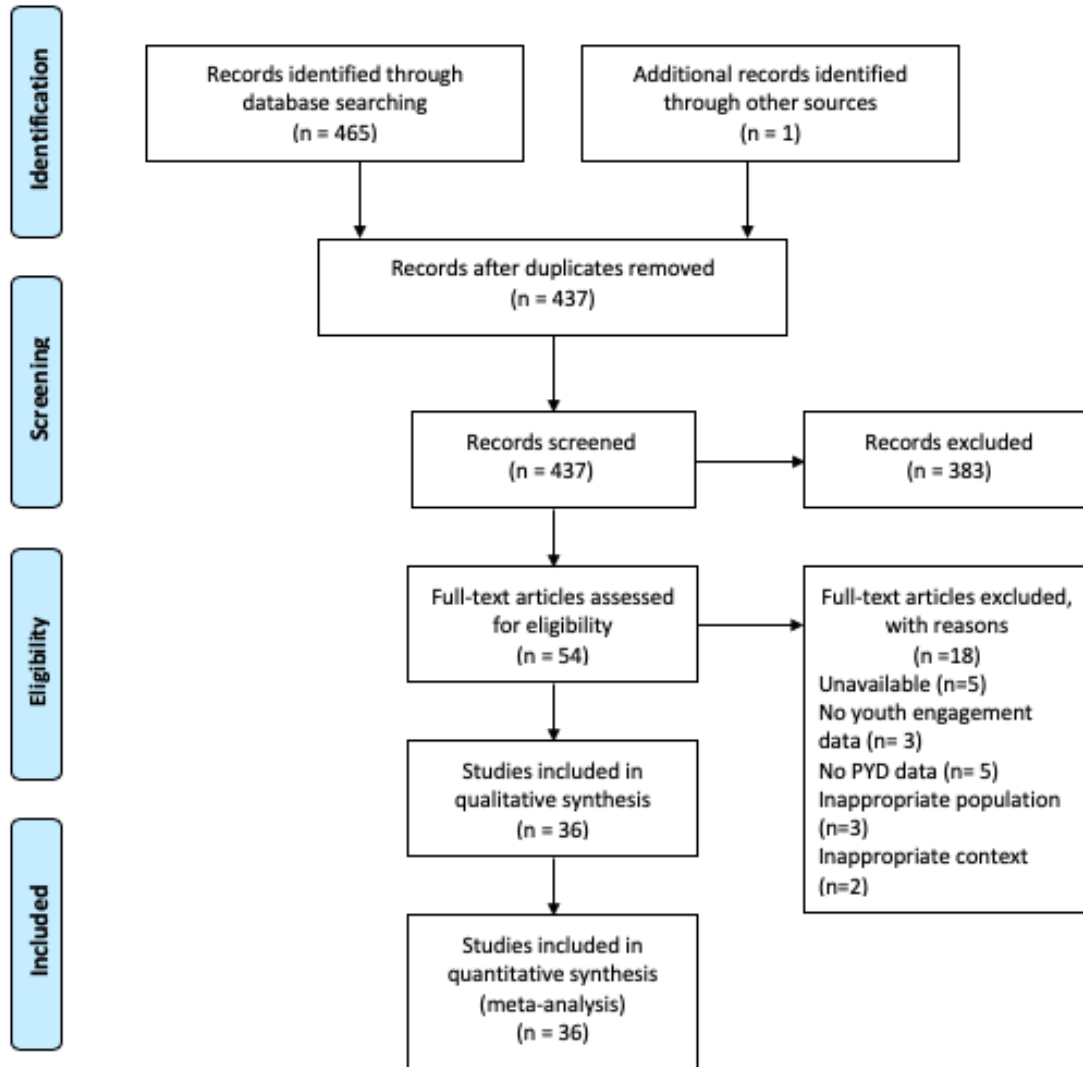
This Capstone will later be combined with survey research conducted with the BounceBack® Youth program at the Canadian Mental Health Association- BC Division. All past and present members of BounceBack®'s Youth Advisory Committee will be invited to participate in a survey assessing PYD and developments of The 6 Cs. This research is being conducted as part of BounceBack®'s annual program activities. Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the Office of Research Ethics at Simon Fraser University on January 13, 2020.

2.6 Results

In total, 436 articles were screened; 36 articles and papers were included in this review (see Figure 2). Results were analyzed using thematic analysis and grouped according to 6 key areas of development outlined under the Positive Youth Development framework: 1) character; 2) confidence; 3) caring; 4) competence; 5) connection; and 6) contribution (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further analysis of the findings related to each development area revealed sub-themes, discussed in more detail below.

Figure 2

PRISMA Flow Diagram³



³ Moher et al. (2009). *Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses: The PRISMA Statement*.

3. Findings

3.1 Character

Under the PYD framework, *character* development involves creating a sense of morality: an understanding and respect for societal and cultural rules and appropriate behaviours; developing a sense of right and wrong; and cultivating integrity (Schmid et al., 2011). One main theme emerging from this review showed that engaged youth experience opportunities to develop positive character strengths rooted in expanding and growing their sense of morality.

Youth engagement initiatives create the conditions for the development of several positive character strengths and processes, including: identity formation; taking initiative; practicing emotional regulation; developing social skills; and forming meaningful relationships with non-family adults (Oliver et al., 2006). One study found that involvement in volunteer activities that were purpose- or issue-oriented, in contrast with religious or arts-based programs, was associated with the development of several positive character strengths, including hope, will, purpose, competence, care, and wisdom (Ludden, 2011). This development is fostered within structured and supportive engagement contexts that support identity exploration and opportunities to develop one's own experiences and values (Ludden, 2011).

3.2 Confidence

Youth who develop *confidence* are defined under the PYD framework as having an overall sense of positive self-regard and self-efficacy (Schmid et al., 2011). In this regard, 'self-efficacy' is defined as have the general belief that one is good and capable in all domains, as opposed to in specific skill areas (Schmid et al., 2011).. The findings showed that engaged youth who developed self-efficacy and leadership, promoting feelings of empowerment.

3.2.1 Self-Efficacy, Leadership, and Empowerment

Multiple studies found that involvement in youth engagement initiatives was related to positive individual outcomes, including increased self-efficacy and

confidence. Youth involved in one program reported that they had increased opportunities for partnerships, capacity for communication, and self-advocacy, enhanced by feelings of social inclusion (Canas et al., 2019).

Youth involved in a participatory action research project viewed confidence as central to their experience, development, and capacity for action (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). In particular, self-efficacy was developed through the opinion formation-sharing-validation cycle (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). When youth were provided with opportunities to share their opinions, experiencing validation from the group built their confidence to continue sharing their thoughts and ideas (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). This development is further supported when engaged youth come from a range of backgrounds and experiences, learning together in an environment that was respectful of differences (Allen, 2018). Of note, youth believed that this development was directly benefiting them outside of their volunteer role in both short- and long-term outcomes (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). Youth reported that their increased confidence supported them to take on additional leadership roles, feeling more comfortable speaking up in academic settings, and applying other skills learned to academic assignments (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). This is best facilitated by creating experiences for youth to take on real, meaningful responsibilities (Allen, 2018).

Looking forward, youth felt that their increased confidence contributed to the development of soft skills that would be useful in their future academic and career endeavours (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). Lastly, these developments at the individual level fostered group cohesiveness, promoting shared goals and aims and advancing the project further (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). By creating a shared learning environment and opportunities for growth, leadership, and responsibility, youth engagement initiatives promote the development of self-efficacy and confidence.

3.3 Caring

The construct of *caring* can be viewed as developing empathy and sympathy for others, along with a commitment to or interest in social justice (Schmid et al., 2011). As explored below, the development of trust is critical in this process; when youth feel that they can trust others in their community, they express more concern for the

well-being of others and the betterment of their community as a whole. In this review, engaged youth experienced an increase in Caring along two main themes: social trust and social well-being, and relational well-being and concern for the common good.

3.3.1 Social Trust and Well-Being

Social trust is comprised of one's trust in others, in governments and social institutions (Kelly, 2009). Social trust is an important feature for community engagement by decreasing suspicion and anonymity amongst community members (Kelly, 2009). When youth are involved in making decisions that affect their communities, they view their communities as safer, engaged and accessible (Kelly, 2009). One study found that minority youth who exhibit greater social trust in others and institutions are more likely to consistently volunteer and engage with their communities (Kelly, 2009). Other studies have found that engaged young adults experienced higher levels of social well-being in contrast to their peers who did not volunteer (Zambianchi, 2016). Social trust, a prerequisite for young people to care about the well-being of others, is the first step in a cyclical process. When youth can trust others in their community, they feel cared for; in turn, this support leads youth to care more for their communities and make efforts to improve social well-being.

3.3.2 Relational Well-Being and The Common Good

One study made explicit the link between personal and relational well-being. When engaged youth work together with mentors, peers and role models to improve collective well-being, they tend to experience a sense of meaning and purpose in life extending beyond themselves (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007; Balsano, 2005). Youth who develop The Six Cs are more likely to view themselves as connected to others and take a personal interest in supporting community needs (Balsano, 2005). This is a cyclical process, where engaged youth are a part of a system that protects and promotes their individual development; in turn, they will seek to promote and sustain this system (Balsano, 2005).

3.4 Competence

The PYD framework identifies *competence* as developments in skill-specific areas, such as social, academic, vocational, and cognitive spheres, along with a

generally positive view of one's abilities across these domains (Schmid et al., 2011). This review found that engaged youth developed Competence in 3 main areas: skill development, academic achievement, and social/emotional gains.

3.4.1 Skill Development

Multiple studies found that engaged youth made gains in personal and professional skill development (Dunne et al., 2017; O'Connor and Jose, 2012; Keller et al., 2019). These skills included advancements in problem-solving, decision-making, planning, goal setting, and improvements in coping skills (Dunne et al., 2017; Oliver et al., 2006). In addition, engaged youth in one study reported gains in both informal communication and public speaking (Allen, 2018). These skills are beneficial for both professional and personal development; in particular, they are associated with positive adaptation and resiliency (Oliver et al., 2006). Further, older youth and young adults may gain more personal satisfaction related to their participation resulting from their higher skill levels, in comparison to younger participants (O'Connor & Jose, 2012). Skill development is best promoted through engagement activities, chosen by youth in collaboration with adult partners, that balance relationally-oriented activities with goal-oriented, instrumental activities (Keller et al., 2019). Through this shared learning process, adults and youth develop skill-building together, exchange power and knowledge, and learn from one another, building feelings of competence in both youth and adult partners (Keller et al., 2019).

3.4.2 Academic Achievement

Short- and long-term gains in academic achievement were one of the clearest findings of this review, supported by multiple studies (Oliver et al., 2006; Chan et al., 2014; Ludden, 2011; Kim & Morgül, 2017; Yu et al., 2018; Balsano, 2005). In comparison to their peers, engaged youth experienced increased academic self-concept, school bonding, and academic self-efficacy (Ludden, 2011). Further, engaged high school students experienced positive gains in school attendance and motivation, both for learning and towards school (Balsano, 2005).

One study found that after controlling for gender, race, socioeconomic status, and general motivation (to eliminate selection effects), volunteering with civic and

community organizations in the 11th grade was associated with higher grade point averages (GPAs) and greater educational expectations 2 years later for both African American and White adolescents (Chan et al., 2014). Similar gains are found in high school Grade Point Averages (GPAs); in the same study, after controlling for socioeconomic and demographic characteristics, participation in engagement initiatives in high school was associated with a 12% increase in GPA the following year (Chan et al., 2014). In comparison to their peers, university students who had developed The Six Cs reported both greater personal growth and higher cumulative GPAs 3 years into their university studies (Yu et al., 2018). Of note, the Positive Youth Development principles uniquely predicted these effects after controlling for the effects of other variables (Yu et al., 2018). These academic findings are also positively correlated with long-term earnings as adults, even after controlling for both individual- and family-level factors (Kim & Morgül, 2017).

Gains in academic achievement are related to a number of factors, including but not limited to: the opportunity to build both personal and interpersonal competence and skills related to academic achievement; connections with supportive peers and adults; and opportunities to think ahead about future occupational possibilities (Chan et al., 2014; Kim & Morgül, 2017).

3.4.3 Social and Emotional Competence

Involvement in youth engagement initiatives promotes social competence, defined as a range of interpersonal skills related to communication and conflict resolution (Balsano, 2005; Oliver et al., 2006). This is supported through engagement initiatives that promote opinion sharing cycles, where youth engage with both their peers and adults to share and solidify their own opinions (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). Further, engaged youth show higher comfort levels resolving social and interpersonal issues; by being in spaces where youth can safely disagree and form their own opinions, engaged youth are equipped to be leaders in resolving interpersonal differences (Balsano, 2005).

On a personal level, engaged youth tend to experience higher self-esteem, be more internally driven towards involvement in prosocial activities, and to have a better understanding of their competencies (Balsano, 2005). Further, engaged youth,

especially youth with detached parental relationships, show reductions in both internalizing and externalizing problems (Park, 2004). This is likely related to the tendency for engaged youth to have a higher internal locus of control in comparison to their peers (Balsano, 2005). Studies on resiliency in youth have shown that young people acquire these adaptive skills through experience as opposed to instruction (Oliver et al., 2006). This effect is lasting; longitudinal research has shown that early community involvement has long-term influences on future thriving (Scales et al., 2006). By providing youth with opportunities to lead, learn and grow, youth learn to both take charge and ownership over their thoughts and actions.

3.5 Connection

Connection in the PYD framework refers to the creation of positive, bidirectional relationships and interactions between young people and their peers, families, communities, schools, and other institutions (Schmid et al., 2011). Two main themes emerged along the construct of Connection: gains in social support and community connectedness, and opportunities for mentorship.

3.5.1 Social Support and Community Connectedness

Numerous studies found that engaged youth had higher rates of community connectedness than their peers (Chan et al., 2014; O'Connor & Jose, 2012; Callina et al., 2015; Ludden, 2011; Halsall & Forneris, 2018; Keller et al., 2019; Scales et al., 2006; Canas et al., 2019; Ramey et al., 2018). Youth from one initiative reported that their involvement increased partnerships, networks and overall individual capacity (Canas et al., 2019).

When youth are exposed to diversity in their communities, they are more likely to develop global trust: the belief that people will generally be kind and fair (Callina et al., 2015). In turn, developing global trust creates the conditions for civic hope, where youth believe they can achieve meaningful goals that benefit others (Callina et al., 2015). Further, youth who make connections with individuals from different social groups tend to experience a reduction in intergroup prejudices (Keller et al., 2019).

One New Zealand study found that Maori (identified as 'minority') youth and NZE (identified as 'majority') youth benefitted equally from their involvement in

youth engagement initiatives, though in different ways; NZE youth showed increased well-being and Maori youth experienced higher social support and community connectedness (O'Connor & Jose, 2012). Similar findings have been reported for initiatives involving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit youth. Youth involved in one engagement initiative felt that relationship development was one of the best parts of their participation and a major program outcome (Halsall & Forneris, 2018).

The socially supportive aspects of youth engagement initiatives may be especially important for younger participants (O'Connor & Jose, 2012). Opportunities to connect with involved, well-adjusted peers influence the activities youth are involved in and the way they view those activities (Ludden, 2011). Specifically, engaged youth are more involved with extracurricular activities in school and feel that doing well academically is important for their social status, both generally and amongst friends (Ludden, 2011).

3.5.2 Mentorship

Throughout the literature, connections with supportive non-family adults are highlighted as facilitators of positive youth development (Callina et al., 2015; Halsall & Forneris, 2018; Gil Clary & Rhodes, 2006; Keller et al., 2019; Bowers et al., 2015; Ja, 2015.) Across a variety of contexts, relationships with committed, caring adults have been identified as one of the most important assets for promoting high levels of Positive Youth Development (Bowers et al., 2015). This is particularly important when considering that youth tend to show the highest rates of social isolation and loneliness during early developmental periods, starting in adolescence (Keller et al., 2019). Many youth who experience real or perceived social isolation lack relationships with non-family adults that are supportive, consistent and caring (Keller et al., 2019). Mentorship, occurring both formally and informally, is a crucial part of this relationship, and can promote improved peer and parental relationships, academic achievement, and self-efficacy amongst engaged youth (Gil Clary & Rhodes, 2006).

In comparison to their peers, youth with mentors scored higher on measures of optimism and positive attitudes towards the future (Callina et al., 2015). This lends support to the finding that for engaged high school students aged 15-18, the greater number of secure connections to non-parental adults, the more likely the young

person was to believe they would graduate from post-secondary education and be happy in the future (Callina et al., 2015). Further, high expectations for future success predicted youth possessing three of The Six C traits: confidence, character and caring (Callina et al., 2015).

Of note, evidence suggests that mentorship programs can effectively promote positive developmental outcomes for First Nations, Métis and Inuit youth (Halsall & Forneris, 2018). Connection to a mentor may be most beneficial for youth who are vulnerable to adverse outcomes (Halsall & Forneris, 2018).

Mentors should be caring and consistent with the youth they work with to best promote a mentoring relationship (Keller et al., 2019). Mentoring relationships that promote the best possible outcomes for both mentors and youth prioritize trust, empathy, support, and reciprocal learning (Keller et al., 2019). Although the quality of the relationship is related to many positive developments, including Confidence, the quantity of time spent with mentors was most strongly related to Positive Youth Development (Bowers et al., 2015). Relationships with both high quality and high quantity of time lead to the best outcomes, including gains in autonomous motivation (Ja, 2015).

3.6 Contribution

Contribution is a sixth construct sometimes included in the Positive Youth Development framework. Contribution can take many forms, both formally and informally, and is an important development resulting from youth engagement initiatives (Callina et al., 2015). Contribution can be considered the manifestation of the other 5 Cs, where youth feel they have the capacity and skills to actively contribute and make a difference in their communities. Through this review, contribution was linked to future activism and civic engagement, as well as peer support.

3.6.1 Future Activism and Civic Engagement

Studies assessing the long-term impact of youth engagement have found multiple positive outcomes relating to future activism and civic engagement. Engaged youth tend to have higher levels of civic knowledge and civic efficacy (Chan et al., 2014).

This supports the finding that youth engaged in initiatives with a social or political impact had increased future political participation, regardless of their class background or further academic advancements (Chan et al., 2014).

Youth engaged with a social cause reported both higher intention to volunteer after high school and an increased likelihood of activism participation (Chan et al., 2014). Of note, one longitudinal study found that youth volunteering predicted adult volunteering at age 29 (Kim & Morgül, 2017). This participation may extend to smaller yet important civic acts; adolescents who participated in youth engagement activities were more likely to volunteer, vote, testify in court, serve as a juror, and to know about current events in adulthood (Chan et al., 2014; Kim & Morgül, 2017). This finding is significant in that in one of these studies, youth participants experienced 4 of 8 family risk indicators (ex. maternal education and unemployment) during childhood (Chan et al., 2014). This highlights the fact that youth engagement initiatives can promote positive trajectories for all, including youth who may be vulnerable to developmental outcomes (Chan et al., 2014).

Another important construct facilitating this process is empowerment. One study found that when youth felt empowered and were viewed as a valuable resource to the engagement initiative, they feel more capable to contribute to society in meaningful ways (Soares et al., 2019). Other long-term outcomes experienced by youth include a stronger sense of community and a strengthened commitment to serving others, providing further support for a feedback loop process: if youth are viewed as valuable resources and competent citizens, they will continue to contribute to their communities into adulthood (Kelly, 2009).

3.7 Additional Findings

Additional findings that did not align with one particular construct but are important for positive youth developmental outcomes are outlined below. Engaged youth demonstrated improved long-term mental health outcomes, which may be supported by developments in resiliency. In addition, youth involved in engagement initiatives participated in less risky behaviours, though this association is more complex.

3.7.1 Mental Health and Resiliency

Resilient youth can adapt to stressful life events and changes in healthy, constructive ways (Grant & Booth, 2009). Youth engagement initiatives enhance feelings of control, meaning and connectedness amongst youth participants (Oliver et al., 2006). Further, engaged youth experience social and emotional development, lower rates of depressive symptoms, and improved psychological well-being as adults. Multiple studies found that engaged youth had decreased depressive symptoms (Chan et al., 2014; Kim & Morgül, 2017; Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007). Importantly, in one study, this association was supported even after controlling for school-, neighbourhood-, and family-level confounders (Kim & Morgül, 2017). This may be supported by developments in social and emotional processes, including improved emotional regulation, and gains in resiliency (Chan et al., 2014; Oliver et al., 2006). In one study, these improvements in psychological well-being were found to last into adulthood (Kim & Morgül, 2017).

Peer support and sharing experiences of lived experiences serve to further support youth mental health outcomes. Through sharing lived experiences, youth can gain perspective on the issues they are dealing with, resulting in youth being better equipped to take steps to address and resolve personal issues (Oliver et al., 2006). Engaged youth who support their peers experience increased self-esteem, decreased dependency, and increased feelings of control and social usefulness (Oliver et al., 2006). Youth engagement supports these positive outcomes through shared learning experiences, increasing the likelihood of receiving social support from peers and adults, and the creation of spaces where youth can learn to develop effective coping strategies (Oliver et al., 2006). It is important to note that not all youth engagement initiatives will involve any formal peer support activities; however, the more time youth spend together working as a group, the more likely it is that this support will occur naturally and/or informally.

3.7.2 Risky Behaviours

Involvement in youth engagement initiatives can serve as a protective factor for risky behaviours amongst youth and set the course for positive future trajectories (Balsano, 2005). Engaged youth tend to show decreased rates of substance use, along

with declines in overall morbidity and mortality (Dunne et al., 2017; Ludden, 2011.). One study found that after controlling for socioeconomic and demographic factors, participation in youth engagement initiatives in high school was associated with a 15% decrease in behavioural problems (Chan et al., 2014). This is supported through multiple processes. One way in which this is facilitated is through gains in self-efficacy, leading to changes in personal beliefs around a young person's capacity to affect change and improve their quality of life (Lindquist-Grantz, 2018). Intergenerational engagement with others in their community may also serve to create social norms that buffer problem behaviour and promote prosocial activities, including thinking through the impacts of their behaviour on both themselves and others (Ludden, 2011). In combination with increased self-efficacy, engaged youth who have connections to supportive adults in their community demonstrate lower rates of violence, substance use, and other risky behaviours (Canas et al., 2019).

Of note, one study found that engaged youth may display both risky and prosocial behaviours across different periods of adolescence (Hershberg et al., 2015). This is important for two reasons. First, this shows that young people can be on a positive developmental track but still experience challenges along the way (Hershberg et al., 2015). Secondly, this shows that all youth can benefit from involvement in youth engagement initiatives, regardless of whether or not they are engaging in risky behaviours (Hershberg et al., 2015).

4. Discussion

The findings from this rapid review demonstrate the positive developmental outcomes for youth involved in youth engagement initiatives across 6 different, yet often overlapping, constructs. While these constructs can be defined separately, the processes that contribute to developments in each of these areas are often overlapping; the same activity in a youth engagement initiative can lead to development across multiple constructs. One example of this is in academic gains: while youth experience increased competence and skill development, they may also experience increases in both their confidence in their academic abilities and connection to their school community. The PYD framework emphasizes the importance of the 6 Cs developing alongside one another in order for positive developmental outcomes to occur. As identified in section 3.5.2 and explored below, support from caring adults and institutions provides the foundation for youth engagement initiatives to facilitate positive developmental outcomes.

Engaged youth experience positive character development through activities that promote developments in resiliency, hope, passion, and more. In turn, these youth become more adaptable, are better able to emotionally regulate, and learn to develop their own identity and values through safe spaces that encourage this exploration.

These character developments further build confidence in engaged youth. Self-efficacy and empowerment serve to promote leadership skills and initiative-taking, all of which were identified as positive individual outcomes for engaged youth. Further, youth themselves viewed the development of these relational skills as beneficial for their future academic and career pathways. This also promoted positive future health outcomes, including lower rates of depressive symptoms, improved psychological well-being into adulthood, and decreased morbidity and mortality. Some of these positive outcomes may be related to a decline in risky behaviours, often supported by gains in self-efficacy, where youth feel they have the power to alter the circumstances in their lives. The opportunity to connect with peers and adults over a shared goal may serve as a further source of support and can act as a buffer for potential risky

behaviours, in part through the creation of alternative social norms within the youth engagement initiative.

Engaged youth care more about their communities and their peers, in part due to gains in social trust and a focus on relational well-being. Youth who are engaged in their communities tend to view them as safer, gaining increased trust in their fellow community members. In turn, they grow to care for and feel connected to their community, continuing to invest in developing community initiatives and community well-being, often into adulthood.

Youth gain many positive skills, both personal and professional, through engagement initiatives. In particular, gains in social competency promote interpersonal skill development in the areas of communication, conflict resolution, and internal motivation. These skills further support adaptation and resiliency, helping to support youth as they transition into young adulthood. Engaged youth show strong short- and long-term gains in academic competence. This is influenced by feelings of school connectedness, connections to supportive adults, and opportunities to consider future career possibilities. Engaged youth consistently experience higher GPAs in both high school and university, as well as increased earnings in their future careers as adults. In general, engaged youth tend to follow positive developmental pathways that promote future thriving.

Social support, community connection and mentorship emerged as major gains in the area of connection. Engaged youth tend to believe that their actions are meaningful and can make a difference through the development of civic hope and global trust. Further, these youth experience higher social connection in comparison to their peers. This is promoted through mentorship opportunities, both from adults involved in the project and older youth having the opportunity to act as role models or mentor younger youth. Connections to supportive, non-parental adults are a crucial feature of youth engagement initiatives, promoting positive developmental outcomes across all 6 C areas.

Youth who have the opportunity to engage with and contribute to their community tend to continue activist activities and civic engagement into adulthood. Engaged youth show increased civic engagement and activism into adulthood through

a range of activities, including voting, completing jury duty, and volunteering. When youth are given the opportunities and develop the skills to make a meaningful difference, they feel empowered and a strengthened commitment to continue serving others.

4.1. Recommendations: Best Practices for Engaging with Youth

This review has provided many recommendations and best practices for engaging with youth to promote optimal outcomes and positive youth development. Youth engagement initiatives should involve genuine opportunities for participation and leadership, rooted in strengths-based approaches and supported by caring, trained adults.

1. Participation should be meaningful and authentic

A review of different youth engagement models showed that the greatest benefits are achieved through fully participatory models that include youth in program decision-making (Dunne et al., 2017). Both the invitation to participate and leadership opportunities must be genuine, not tokenistic (Dunne et al., 2017). This is best facilitated when youth are involved in projects from the beginning, creating space for their input and voices to shape the direction of the project. It is important to consider the differing needs youth from diverse backgrounds may present. Meeting youth where they are at and allowing youth to participate in ways that work for them helps to promote equitable access to engagement initiatives.

2. Engagement initiatives should be rooted in strengths and supported by caring adults

Programs that focus on resilience versus vulnerabilities, offer flexibility for participation and allow youth to connect with peers in their community while cultivating a welcoming, non-judgemental environment show improved engagement rates (Dunne et al., 2017). Further, one study found that approximately 75% of effective PYD programs focused on developing the ‘Big Three’ features: 1) genuine opportunities for participation and leadership in program activities; 2) program activities emphasize life skill development; 3) youth are supported through sustained,

caring youth-adult relationships (Lerner et al., 2006). Youth engagement initiatives require sustained resources and adult allies in professional roles to support this work. Practitioners should strive to consciously develop both engagement initiatives and programs that promote the 6 Cs for all involved youth. Engaging youth with differing abilities involves focusing on the strengths of involved youth, supporting them to participate in the ways in which they can excel; flexibility and adaptability in your approach essential.

3. Adaptations and flexibility: Meeting youth where they are at

Perhaps most important is adapting youth engagement initiatives to meet the needs of the community one is working with. This can occur at any point along the engagement process, ranging from whether meetings are online or in-person to the types of activities youth will lead. This requires planning ahead and considering practical factors, such as: the timing of the school year and its impact on your program; how youth will be recognized and compensated for their involvement; as well as providing opportunities to step back and disengage if youth begin to feel overwhelmed. You should discuss any specific or unique needs with the youth you are working with and seek out ways to support their participation, striving to limit potential barriers to their involvement. Specific training in the areas of cultural safety, gender equity, trauma-informed practice, and more can help adult allies to become better equipped to support their youth participants.

4. Evaluate how youth engagement initiatives are benefitting youth

Evaluation is crucial to any program, but particularly ones that include community engagement in their approach. The Positive Youth Development Inventory is one way to assess whether participation in an engagement initiative has contributed to the development of The 6 Cs (YouthRex, 2019) . This inventory is publicly available for any program to use. Mixed-methods research that combines validated tools with qualitative methods, such as focus groups or interviews, allows practitioners to both compare the outcomes of their initiative to others and to evaluate the unique aspects of their project or program. Leading this work from an equity lens is crucial for long-term development and sustainability, in order to meet the needs of diverse youth.

5. Conclusion

There is an increasing need to think outside of the box when it comes to public health initiatives. By working with youth from the beginning of program or service development, initiatives can be created that meet the expressed needs of youth. In turn, organizations are directly benefitting the involved youth, promoting positive short- and long-term development.

Youth engagement initiatives and Youth-Led Participatory Action Research are actionable ways to increase program engagement and sustainability while promoting positive youth development. This approach is resource-intensive and requires an organizational commitment and recognition of the importance of youth engagement. However, when done correctly, these initiatives benefit all involved. For too long, youth voices have been excluded from the creation of programs and services designed to benefit them. Youth have the answers; it is our job to listen.

6. Reflection

Being able to write about a topic I am truly passionate about made this Capstone project very meaningful. The inspiration for this work stems from my many years of lived experience supporting loved ones with mental illnesses. I have worked as a Program Facilitator for 2 youth engagement initiatives and as a Youth Advisor for 2 other initiatives since 2019. I am eager to bring what I have learned through this Capstone project back into those spaces.

This Capstone project challenged me to develop stronger research skills. I have never viewed myself as being ‘research-oriented’ and have always preferred ‘hands-on’ practice. However, the activities I completed through my Practicum placement (extending into my Capstone) changed the way I view this work and my ability to do it well. I feel that I have a better understanding of how to take this research and make it applicable to my everyday work, particularly through developing recommendations for how to best promote positive youth development. I feel better able to integrate ‘traditional’ research approaches with practical approaches to implement the knowledge gained through this work.

I am starting to ‘age out’ of the youth space and want to continue doing this work as the best adult partner and ally I can be. It is important to me that young people benefit from their involvement in engagement initiatives and I feel that this research has helped me to understand how to do this work better, while incorporating elements of equity into my current and future practice. I have personally been a part of engagement initiatives that positively contributed to my own development of the 6 C’s, but I have also volunteered my time with initiatives that didn’t always recognize or honour my involvement adequately. It is so important to me that no young person that I work with ever feels that their voice is not valued, or that they are tokenized or taken advantage of in any way. Going forward, promoting the 6 C’s will be the guiding framework that leads me through my work in this field.

7. Public Health Competencies

This Capstone paper addressed the following competencies: **CC5:** Social Sciences, **CC6:** Partnerships, Professionalism, Collaboration and Advocacy, **CC7:** Communication, and **CC11:** Gender, Culture, and Social Location. CC5 is incorporated into this research through the use of psychological theories (the Positive Youth Development framework) to contextualize the outcomes of youth engagement initiatives. CC6 was demonstrated through the focus on working with youth as partners and advocating for their involvement in this work, as well as how to be a better adult partner and ally in this work. CC7 was represented through recommendations for how to best work with youth in engagement initiatives. Lastly, CC11 was addressed throughout this paper by weaving an equity lens into this research, noting and addressing issues specific to vulnerable and minority youth. In addition, my reflection on my own positionality in this work supported the development of CC11.

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