

# **Participatory Research with Street-Involved Youth in the Youth Injection Prevention Project**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Youth participation in research has become increasingly popular, though there is still a paucity of examples in the literature that offer insight into the challenges and opportunities that such an endeavour offers. This is particularly true of research that includes street-involved populations of youth. This paper explores the experiences of six youth in the Youth Injection Prevention Project (YIP), a community-based research project with street-involved youth in the Metro Vancouver Region, using a positive youth development approach and a resiliency and empowerment framework. Although there were many challenges to the collaboration, including issues of time commitment and expenditure as well as overcoming youth's personal barriers to participation, the results of the YIP project demonstrate that meaningful participation in research can offer youth important avenues to develop employability skills, promote resiliency, empowerment and wellness.

**Keywords: Participatory Research; Youth Participation; Street-involved Youth; Resiliency; Empowerment**

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## **Introduction**

Street-involved populations of youth given their marginalized and stigmatized identities in research and society at large are typically excluded from meaningful participation in processes that promote their health and that of their communities (Chen, Poland & Skinner, 2007; Harper & Carver, 1999; Paterson & Panessa, 2008). Today, youth participation in research is still in its infancy; and given the paucity of examples of participation in the literature particularly of street-involved youth; suggest there is a need to investigate the particularities of involving youth as collaborators, including the challenges and opportunities that such endeavours offer (Nygreen et al., 2006). This paper thus hopes to add to the literature by exploring the experiences of six youth, most of them with experience in street-involvement (experiential youth) in the Youth Injection Prevention Project (YIP), a community-based research project with street-involved youth in the Metro Vancouver Region. The analysis draws from a process evaluation of the YIP project, and focuses on how participation impacted youth collaborators, using a positive youth development approach and a resiliency and empowerment framework. More knowledge about youth participation will only strengthen the quality of practice (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, McLaughlin, 2002) and may serve to push forward an agenda of positive youth development, youth engagement and empowerment.

## **Background**

### ***Street-Involved Youth: risk and resiliency***

Adolescence is a critical time in the development of a person's identity, his/her emotional and psychological independence, understanding of health, and future role in the community (United Nations' Children's Fund, 2002). It is a time for exploration of one's ideologies, beliefs and sexuality towards creating an adult identity. Though the majority of young people go through their adolescent years without major problems (Oliver, Collin, Burns & Nicholas, 2006), many engage in a range of risky behaviours that have

negative effects on their healthy development, including drug use and unprotected sex (Harper & Carver, 1999). For marginalized, street-involved youth, the path to adulthood is further compromised by their challenging life circumstances and sometimes troubling history (Harper & Carver, 1999).

The term "street involved youth" is a broad term used to describe “not only youth who are homeless and actively living on the streets, but also youth who are intermittently living with their parents or caregivers and who are involved in a lifestyle affiliated with the street culture and/or economy” (Chambers, 2007, p.18). Though the heterogeneity among street involved youth must be acknowledged (Frankish, Hwang & Quantz, 2005), there are many similar characteristics that this group share that place their development and health at risk; including poverty, homelessness, using and/or selling drugs, working in the sex trade, or participating in illegal activities (Smith, Saewyc, Albert, MacKay & Northcott, 2007). Street-involved youth are at high-risk for a wide spectrum of health problems; including blood borne infections such as HIV and hepatitis C, as well as sexually transmitted infections, addiction, depression and suicide (Boivin, Roy, Haley & Galbaud du Fort, 2005; Smith et al., 2007; Marshall et al., 2009). Street involved youth are susceptible to injection drug use (IDU); and it has been estimated that in Vancouver and around British Columbia around 40% of these youth have injected drugs (Smith et al., 2007; Wood et al., 2006). In Vancouver, approximately 16% of young (under 30 years of age) injection drug users are infected with HIV, while 57% are infected with hepatitis C (Miller, Kerr, Strathdee, Li & Wood, 2007). Thus, street-involved youth are recognized as a vulnerable and marginalized population.

Although most of the research has focused on these risk behaviors and health problems of street-involved youth, in recent years some researchers have begun to see the youth in a different light, and have focused on their resilience and strength. Nonetheless, research on resiliency and street-involved youth is still minimal (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). These youth who live in sometimes very stressful and dangerous environments are able to adapt and survive under extremely dire circumstances (Rew & Horner, 2003). They are known to be extremely resourceful, able to navigate services and institutions efficiently and

effectively, using a wide range of strategies and problem solving skills to overcome the daily challenges of unstable housing and the lack of basic needs (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry & Flynn, 2007). Researchers thinking within the context of the lives of these youth have affirm that experiential youth do indeed have incredible coping skills and resiliency to overcome challenges. This perspective contrast with the traditional view that these youth are merely deviant and deficient (Bender et al., 2007; Kidd, 2003). Given the stories of struggles and extremely abusive pasts, Kidd (2004) notes that it is a major achievement in itself that some of these youth are still alive and coping. Thus, it is time that we begin to see the agency and strength that street-involved youth express in their daily lives, and acknowledge them as carriers of knowledge and indeed talents to offer and to be cultivated.

### ***A Change in Paradigm: from risk to assets***

In their communities many marginalized youth, including youth in general, face discouraging and stigmatizing attitudes that prevent them from making their voices heard (Chen, Poland & Skinner, 2007). Pejorative views shared by society at large and the media in general portray youth (predominantly marginalized street-involved youth) through a problem-centred lens, as unmotivated, difficult, unreliable, as well as drug users, delinquents, and school dropouts (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Damon, 2004; Olivier et al., 2006; Paterson & Panessa, 2008;). These stereotypes of youth have prevailed within health research and drug use prevention in particular (Kim, Crutchfield, Williams & Hepler, 1998), which has focused on youth risk factors and deficiencies, rather than protective factors or youth assets and resiliency. These deficit models focus on “correcting problems or remediating developmental incapacity” (Oliver et al., 2006, p.2), and have placed a higher focus on pre-dispositions and an emphasis on individual behavioural changes (Damon, 2004; Kim et al., 1998; Schensul & Berg, 2004).

The result of this orientation has been victim-blaming models that have not been effective in articulating concrete action plans to create something positive for youth in their environments, while at the same time improving the individual lives of youth (Kim et al., 1998; Schensul & Berg, 2004). The risk-factor paradigm coupled with the prevailing stereotypes about marginalized youth in particular have contributed to scepticism about engaging these youth as active participants in health related programmes (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster 2004; Paterson & Panessa, 2008). Youth have not typically been included in decisions or research that affect their lives, particularly marginalized youth whose voices are rarely heard and accounted for (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Delgado, 2006).

### ***Positive Youth Development***

In the past two decades the risk-factor paradigm in youth development has been progressively shifting towards approaches that view youth as social assets and potential allies through the study, recognition, and promotion of youth strengths and resiliency (Damon, 2004; O'Donoghue, Kirshner & McLaughlin, 2002). Perhaps the most influential approach in this shift has been positive youth development (PYD).

The main guiding principles of PYD are that resiliency and competency building are essential components in the life of young people to promote healthy (positive) behavioural development during adolescence and into adulthood (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Kim et al. (1998) assert that this new paradigm is not against the traditional approach, but rather complements it, by focusing not only on prevention but also on development and promotion. Within PYD, youth, even the most marginalized, begin to be recognized for their potentiality (Damon, 2004). As the lens through which youth are viewed changes, youth begin to be seen as assets and resources rather than problems to be managed (Birkhead, Riser, Mesler, Tallon & Klein, 2006; Kim et al., 1998; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Thus, the statement “problem-free is not fully prepared” began to be used by policy makers and programme planners who addressed youth issues (Pittman,

Irby, Tolman, Yohalem & Ferber, 2003). Outcomes solely related to prevention were not sufficient for youth to transition “fully prepared” into healthy adults; youth also needed to develop academic, vocational, and life skills among others (Pittman et al., 2003). Positive Youth Development recognizes that youth need to cultivate their internal assets and strengths through ongoing support and challenging opportunities to incentive growth, healthy relationships, empathy, critical thinking, and leadership skills (Damon, 2004; Kim et al., 1998; Pittman et al., 2003). These components are considered essential to promote healthy (positive) behaviour and improve health and well-being (Kreipe, 2006; Ginwright & James, 2002). Furthermore, youth development not only emphasizes changes in youth, but also in the adults and institutions with which they are involved (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

### ***Youth Participation***

PYD has pushed towards not only giving youth a choice, but also giving them a voice (Pittman et al., 2003). The PYD movement has been an essential component in forwarding an agenda of authentic engagement of youth in health improvement initiatives, including in research design and implementation (Powers & Tiffany, 2006; Suleiman, Soleimanpour & London, 2006). The World Health Organization (WHO) since the Ottawa Charter (1986) has emphasized the need to engage people, including youth, in the design of solutions to their own health problems through meaningful participation, capacity building, and development. Hence, participation is recognized as an important element in the promotion of health and PYD.

Wong, Zimmerman and Parker (2010) define youth participation “as the democratic practice of young people actively engaging with their social environment” (p.106). More specifically, Checkoway & Richards-Schuster (2004) define youth participation in research and evaluation as “a process of involving young people in knowledge development at the community level” (p. 85). Thus, youth participation involves the active participation of youth in decision-making in institutions and organizations to

address issues that affect their lives and/or communities. An important issue within these definitions is the “quality” of this participation, which should go beyond tokenism. In other words, youth participation should not only be thought of as the presence or attendance of youth, but rather in whether youth have influence over decision-making of programs and organizations (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004; Holden, Meseri, Evans, Crankshaw & Ben-Davies, 2004). Youth participation promotes collaboration and partnership with adults. Youth are thought of as “directors” and decision-makers rather than their traditional roles as “subjects” of research and evaluations (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004). Nonetheless, it is important to note that in regards to youth participation, the main concern is not who creates or begins an intervention or research, but rather that youth have meaningful participation in the process (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004).

### ***Youth in Participatory Research***

Participatory research can be defined as “an umbrella term for a school of approaches that share a core philosophy of inclusivity and of recognizing the value of engaging in the research process (rather than including only as subjects of the research) those who are intended to be the beneficiaries, users, and stakeholders of the research” (Cargo & Mercer, 2008, p. 326). The participatory nature of this type of research requires that participants’ opinions and experiences are valued and recognized in knowledge creation by giving them decision-making power, through processes of collaboration, co-learning and capacity building. Research issues are addressed within the context of people’s lives with the goal of improving the lives of those involved and the health of their communities. Participatory research has, thus, been associated with enhancing resiliencies that are already in existence in participants and communities and promoting better environments (Macauly et al., 1999). It has also been associated with enhanced problem solving capacity of the participants involved by supporting them to critically analyze social problems and become themselves agents for social change (Macauly et. al, 1999; Cargo & Mercer, 2008).

Although participatory research has evolved as a new paradigm in health research and become with time an increasingly used method (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Flicker, 2008) particularly with adult groups (Nygren, Kwon, Sanchez, 2006), youth participation in research and evaluation is a much more recent and uncommon endeavour (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; Chen et al., 2007; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). As the paradigm changes from risk to youth development and empowerment, there has been more focus on youth participation and engagement. In recent years, a few prominent journals have even dedicated entire issues to youth participation in research and evaluation (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006; London, Zimmerman, Erbstein, 2003). Still most literature available on participatory research projects involves adults, not youth (Nygren et al., 2006).

Participatory research has been regarded as a valuable avenue through which marginalized youth can be given agency and power to their voice (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). However, participation of marginalized youth in health interventions have been evaluated as limited in scope and characterised as tokenistic (Magljlic & Tiffany, 2006; Paterson & Panessa, 2008). According to a study on youth engagement in harm reduction interventions, the participation of marginalized youth was limited to research subjects only, or to mere attendance and more rarely as peer educators (Paterson & Panessa, 2008). Many of the youth described in these research projects can be termed as “urban youth” which Nygren et al. (2006) describe as a “euphemism for underserved, poor, marginalized, ethnic minority youth” (p. 108). These research projects include research with youth of color in the United States (Cahill, 2007; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009); ethnic minority youth (Berg, Conman & Schensul, 2009; Nygren et al., 2006); youth with chronic illness (Van Staa, Jedeloo, Latour, Trappenburg, 2010); students, mostly in underserved communities (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2004; Nygren et al., 2006; Soleimanpour, Brindis, Geierstanger, Kandawalla & Kurlaender, 2008; Suleiman et al., 2006, Wilson et al., 2008), and urban youth internationally (Chawla & Driskell, 2006; Magljlic & Tiffany, 2006). Few research projects describe the participation of arguably the most marginalized and stigmatized population of youth, that is, street-involved youth in research, youth who have had experience with street-involvement (Flicker, 2008;

Harper & Carver, 1999; Paterson & Panessa, 2008; Poland et al., 2002), and particularly youth with experience in injection drug use (Coupland & Maher, 2005).

Empowerment has been described as an outcome of youth involvement in processes such as participatory research where opportunities are presented for youth to develop positive identities and affect healthy changes in their communities and in their own lives (Cargo, Grams, Ottoson, Ward & Green, 2003; Chen et al., 2007; Harper & Carver, 1999; Poland et al., 2002; Powers et al., 2006; Suleiman et al., 2006). Youth participation in research and health initiatives has been linked to youth developing increased capacity for cooperation and making improved life choices such as returning to school (Poland et al., 2002). It has also been associated to the development of new skills, expansion of life choices, increased self-efficacy and an overall increased positive identity development and self-awareness among others (Cargo et al., 2003; Kim et al., 1998). In addition, youth participation in health research has been associated with improved data collection, analysis, validity, relevance, participant recruitment, and research dissemination (Flicker, 2008; Harper & Carver, 1999; Powers et al., 2006).

There are many benefits of engaging specifically “experiential” youth in participatory research. Participation of experiential youth can add to an understanding of the local knowledge from an insider perspective since they have first-hand experience with the research issue in question, thus the term experiential (London et. al, 2003). It can create a greater sense of trust, as peers may be better able to share and communicate information with each other within the context of their lives, and be able to better empathize with the target group (Hughes, 1999; Mitchell, Nyakake & Oling, 2007). Youth can be essential in developing culturally appropriate research and dissemination tools, and ‘youth friendly’ approaches to data collection with peers, as well as help validate results (Flicker, 2008; Harper & Carver, 1999; Maticka-Tyndale & Barnett, 2010; Powers et al., 2006). Participation of experiential youth has been credited with promoting a greater sense of credibility and acceptability in the community (Harper & Carver, 1999). Of significance, it has also been found that positive outcomes of youth engagement are greater when



youth are at- risk in comparison to youth who are less vulnerable (Paterson & Panessa, 2008).

As mentioned, there is a lot of scepticism surrounding the participation of youth in research due to long standing stereotypes about adolescence and youth. This scepticism is reinforced by the inherent challenges associated with involving youth, particularly experiential and marginalized youth. Given the particular developmental, socio-economic, and psychological challenges these youth face, incorporating experiential marginalized youth in research can be demanding and complex even when seen as an effective and worthy endeavour (Harper & Carver, 1999; Chen et al., 2007; Poland et al., 2002; Powers et al., 2006; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Challenges include the extra time commitment required to ensure youth succeed and that their educational and personal needs are met (Harper & Carver, 1999; Poland et al., 2002), as well as budget constraints associated to the need to extend project timelines has been described as major challenges (Poland et al., 2002). Some authors have even argued that given these complex challenges, involving youth in all aspects of research (including evaluation) is not a feasible, nor the most desirable approach (Chen et al., 2007; Van Staa et al., 2010).

## **Study Framework**

This study hopes to add to the current dialogue on youth participation in research through an exploration of the experiences of the six youth collaborators in the YIP project. In this study we use a positive youth development approach, as previously described within an empowerment and resiliency framework, discussed below. These complementary approaches and frameworks were chosen since they focus on promoting health and wellness through cultivating individual and collective assets and strengths within enabling environments (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006; Wong et al., 2010). We move from the perspective that if we continue to characterize homeless and street-involved youth within a risk and deficiency lens, we are ultimately limiting their life choices (Bender et al., 2007). However, if we begin to view these youth as potential assets and allies, we can

acknowledge their agency and voice and ultimately open new opportunities for their future.

## ***Resiliency***

Though there is no universal definition of resiliency (Knight, 2007), the term came to be commonly conceptualized as “those factors and processes that interrupt the trajectory from risk to problem behaviors or psychopathology and thereby result in adaptive outcomes even in the presence of adversity” (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994, p.4). Resilience is associated with coping mechanisms and essential life skills, such as emotional and social intelligence and a sense of wellbeing and optimism (Holden et al., 2004; Knight, 2007; Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). Research has shown that resilience is not a state that only some youth have; all youth have some form of resiliency, and there is a need to develop and cultivate these states (Knight, 2007). It is important to note that the very definition or understanding of resiliency is contextually and culturally bound, and that some researchers have recognized that maladaptive or problem behaviour and resiliency can co-exist (Ungar & Teram, 2000), as exemplified by the case of street-involved youth. Behaviours such as participating in gangs or leaving school, which are almost universally considered negative behaviours, may represent for marginalized youth an act of resistance and resilience to the stigmatization and marginalization they experience in their day-to-day lives (Ungar & Teram, 2000). It may in fact represent an act of empowerment for the individual who is able to acquire agency and power outside the normative discourse from which they have been excluded (Ungar & Teram, 2000). Resiliency may be seen as maladaptive if youth who are in search of agency and power to cope can only find the latter in contexts that are prone to risk and the development of unhealthy relationships and identities (such as gang membership). Thus, to understand resiliency in marginalized youth and how they adapt to oppression and adversity, one must consider, within their social context, the very agency or power of youth to participate in the discourses that define them and their future. To promote resiliency and wellbeing among marginalized youth one should also promote agency, and

provide youth with opportunities to express their power in ways that protect their health and wellbeing and that of their communities (Kidd, 2003; Ungar & Teram, 2000).

## ***Empowerment***

Empowerment provides a useful framework to promote resiliency in youth. Empowerment can be defined as a process by which people gain control over their lives and environment through meaningful engagement in communities, organizations and institutions, and increased critical self and social awareness of the context of their lives while intending to address problems in communities (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Wallerstein & Bernestein, 1994; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). It is a multi-level construct that has been described as both an individual and collective experience. The concept makes the link between changes at the individual level (i.e. increased sense of well-being, self-esteem and control) and changes in the environment (i.e. socio-political structures and quality of life). The goals of empowerment are to foster healthy individuals while at the same time, creating healthier communities, and positive community change (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994).

Youth empowerment has its own particularities and is directly linked to the promotion of positive youth development and resiliency. Youth empowerment emphasizes the crucial importance of adolescent participation in meaningful activities that offer opportunities for skills development, overcoming challenges and the promotion of positive social bonding between individuals (particularly with adults) as well as communities and institutions (Cargo et al., 2003; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Kim et. al, 1998). These opportunities are meant to give youth a sense of purpose and meaning and prevent what Chinman and Linney (1998) have called a sense of 'rolelessness'. Positive reinforcement and recognition of success and efforts from adults are crucial and an essential element in the development of self-esteem and self-efficacies related to individual empowerment (Cargo et al., 2003; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Kim et. al, 1998). In the model developed by Cargo et al. (2003), youth empowerment is understood as a transactional process that

occurs by a gradual shift in practice towards more egalitarian practices, through a partnering relationship with adults in a supportive and welcoming environment. Their model makes a connection between individual and community empowerment by adding elements such as the importance of promoting the voice of youth and advocacy competence. These models propose that building youth competence through meaningful participation, capacity building and action, within a caring and supportive environment, promotes salutary effects (resiliency) and empowerment that prevent youth from engaging in risk behaviors and associating themselves with negative identities.

## **The Youth Injection Prevention Project (YIP)**

The Youth Injection Prevention project (YIP) is a community-based research project conducted in the Metro Vancouver region. The project is a collaboration between researchers from the British Columbia Centre for Disease Control (BCCDC), university researchers, a team of six youth collaborators, and nine community organizations attending to at-risk street involved youth in the Metro Vancouver region. The purpose of the project was to identify factors that may cause youth to start using injection drugs, but more importantly factors that may prevent youth from injecting; in other words, factors that promote resiliency. The YIP project has four phases. **Phase 1** included interviews with service providers who work with at-risk street-involved youth and **Phase 2** included one-on-one interviews and focus group interviews with at-risk street-involved youth and included results dissemination. We have currently applied for funding for **Phases 3** which will include interactive workshops with youth and **Phase 4** in which we will develop and implement an intervention.

At the start of Phase 2, ten youth collaborators were hired part-time for an initial period of six months, a period which was subsequently extended to 12 months. A number of characteristics guided our choice of collaborators: age range (same as the target population-15-24 years), ability to complete assigned work, ability to relate to other youth, as well as their direct or indirect knowledge of and experience with IDU and

street-involvement. Youth needed to have not injected in the last 6 months and were not permitted to show up to work under the influence of drugs.

Most of the youth collaborators were experiential youth, and some still very much street entrenched. In the first two months, due to concerns regarding drug use during trainings, poor attendance, and threatening behavior, four youth had to be let go. A group of six core youth collaborators aged 19 to 24 years remained: 3 females and 3 males; 3 of European descent, and one each of South-East Asian, Aboriginal and African American descent. Four were experiential in street-involvement of which two had been injectors.

While researchers from the BCCDC conducted interviews in Phase 1 and 2, youth collaborators facilitated the focus groups with non-injectors in Phase 2. During each focus group, the project coordinator or the assistant coordinator would be present at all times to support youth in their facilitation. Prior to data collection youth collaborators received training in qualitative research including note taking, participant observation, and focus group facilitation. Youth collaboratively designed the project logo and focus group and interview scripts. They visited community partner sites to learn both about available youth services and the study population and participated in qualitative open coding exercises and results dissemination. During training and data collection, youth collaborators received an hourly stipend for their participation.

Though the inclusion of youth collaborators was part of the initial design of the project and seen as a means of achieving the project objectives, some of the outcomes of their involvement in the project were not foreseen nor included in the initial project objectives. Laverack & Labonte (2000) call this process “parallel tracking”. The authors discuss how some programs may begin with conventional/top-down approaches, where issues and activities are largely defined by an organization. Nevertheless, participatory elements may also be included as a means to achieving project objectives, which are largely related to disease prevention efforts. Parallel to the conventional cycle of programming, a bottom-up parallel track of empowerment and/or capacity building can emerge and become an essential part of the health outcome desired. As the parallel track develops

participation and inclusion become not only a means but also important outcomes of the intervention itself.

Though the main objective of the project was to learn about resiliency factors among street involved youth through interviews and focus groups with services providers and street involved youth, by including experiential youth as part of the research team, new outcomes began to emerge. Through our work with the youth collaborators, we began to learn about and address the very issues we were trying to understand, that is, the promotion of resiliency in street-involved youth. These unforeseen developments in the project created a real shift in the overall paradigm of the project to one of participation and youth development. As the project evolved, deliberate attempts were made to address the emerging needs and challenges of the youth collaborators and promote ownership and empowerment among them.

## **Study Methodology**

As the new set of outcomes appeared, a process evaluation of the youth collaborators' participation was developed to capture the unique experiences of these youth. The objectives of the evaluation were to determine how project involvement has impacted youth collaborators and identify process issues to ensure project relevance, viability and success. Though concerns with process issues will emerge, this paper reflects mainly on how the youth collaborators were impacted through their involvement in the YIP project.

The analysis in this paper draws from the process evaluation, which includes semi-structured interviews with youth collaborators; researcher's fieldnotes, experiences and observations, as well as notes from team meetings and debriefing sessions. The semi-structured interviews were conducted at two different occasions, one at 3 months and one near completion at 7 months. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded thematically. The codes from the interviews also provided a framework to analyze the fieldnotes.

## **Results**

In the following sections, we will describe the main categories that emerged from the process evaluation. These categories can be found in youth empowerment models (Cargo et al., 2003; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Kim et. al, 1998) and the literature on youth participation. In this study, each category offers a unique glimpse into the experiences of the youth collaborators in the YIP project and may add to our understanding of participatory research with youth and improve the practice. These categories are: Positive Identity, Sense of Purpose and Meaning, Relationship Building, Democratization of Knowledge, Self and Social Awareness, and Voice and Advocacy.

As Laverack & Labonte (2000) have noted in their research on empowerment and health promotion; we recognize that community empowerment outcomes may only come to full realization many years after this research project has ended. Therefore, we do not intend to offer concrete evidence of these outcomes, but rather reflect on them, through the recognition that the process of doing participatory research and promoting empowerment is as much part of the outcome, as the outcome (i.e. empowerment and community change) itself.

### ***Positive Identity***

The youth collaborators experienced a great sense of pride (self-esteem) in being part of the project, and having been hired. The youth collaborators were given the opportunity and agency to define themselves within society's dominant discourse (as collaborators in research). The creation of positive identities among the youth was central in strengthening their self-esteem and sense of efficacy. The notion that now they were "youth collaborators" rather than other negative identities they had acquired at different stages of their life, was a driving force to make the changes they wanted in their lives.

*“Skills that I acquired during this was more self-confidence... More understanding of myself... I still don’t know who I am yet to this day and I’m working on that... When I joined this project I started to change myself ‘cause I’m, like, I’m a researcher. In my mind I’m, like, I’m a researcher, you have to start changing ways. So I dropped actually- I did 500 ‘unfriends’ on Facebook. I just deleted them. Five hundred of them. Which was a big, big step for me. Because I’m trying to move on with my life.”* – **Youth Collaborator #2**

Kidd (2008) in his research on the resiliency of street-involved youth has noted the crucial importance of developing the self-esteem of this vulnerable group. Homeless/street-involved youth frequently suffer from stigmatized identities and are, for the most part, viewed negatively by service providers, government bureaucracies, their peers and society in general (Bender et al., 2007). Research on resiliency and marginalized youth has shown that youth barred by stigma are given limited avenues to develop positive identities for themselves and thus begin to shape their identities according to negative parameters, which in turn re-enforce stigma (Bender et al., 2007; Hatt, 2007; Kidd, 2007; Kidd 2003; Ungar & Teram, 2000). Improving the self-esteem of this group has a major role in promoting their resiliency given their experiences of social stigma and victimization, and the value they place on personal experience and self-reliance (Kidd, 2003).

Wexler, DiFluvio and Burke (2009) recognize that in groups of marginalized youth "group affiliation can help a young person re-conceptualize personal difficulty as a collective struggle" (p.566), and reinforce a sense of belonging and a way to move forward. Within the group setting of the project, it was important to recognize and reinforce individual identities within larger groups outside the project. For the Aboriginal youth involved in the project for example, it was crucial to her that we value and recognize her identity as an Aboriginal youth, within our own group identity through acknowledging that her participation enriched our group and brought valuable new insight. This helped to strengthen her identity and self-pride. A similar experience was observed in another youth



who self-identified as transgendered. These positive identities were progressively reinforced as the youth collectively and individually overcame challenges and engaged in the trainings and focus groups. In time, there was the formation of a collective positive identity and increased collective esteem.

*“... [A]ll them and my youth co-researchers, like, I feel like family ‘cause we’ve all, for the youth side of it, we’ve all come from really bad backgrounds. We’ve all been places we shouldn’t have been but yet we still come together and yet we can still do our jobs.”-*

### **Youth Collaborator #2**

Thus, the importance of collaborative research as a source of self-esteem and resource to develop positive identities in youth was a major finding of this study.

## ***Sense of Purpose and Meaning***

While there is very little research on the importance of purpose in adolescent development as a component of resiliency and wellbeing, purpose and meaning in a youth’s life has been shown to have several positive effects on youth including “prosocial behavior, moral commitment, achievement, and high self-esteem” (Damon, Menon, Bronk, 2003, p. 120). Resiliency in youth can be directly linked to youth's realization that they too have a role in society (a positive role), and that society values them enough to support them and offer them the necessary opportunities to succeed (Brennan, 2008). For the youth collaborators, it was very important to see themselves doing a job that was meaningful and had an impact on the community. Many of the youth discussed barriers to finding work that was meaningful due to their level of education and age; jobs that were not just ‘flipping burgers’. For the youth collaborators, overcoming the challenges of participating in the project and working towards understanding and addressing injection drug use among their peers gave them a new sense of purpose, commitment and motivation to work on their own future goals and aspirations.

*“Just coming here just improves my self-esteem. Something to do, purpose.”- Youth Collaborator #4*

The same youth, as a result of her participation in the project, decided to start working and go back to school. Below she explained how her decisions came about:

*“I’m doing something really cool but it’s only for 10 hours a month. I enjoy doing it. So why don’t I take the route which might lead me to more of it”-Youth collaborator #4*

The youth’s quote demonstrates how offering youth meaningful opportunities to develop a sense of purpose and meaning can promote their sense of agency and power; propelling them forward towards achieving their life goals and aspirations.

### ***Relationship Building***

As mentioned, essential components of youth participation and empowerment are supportive environments and relationships, particularly with adult mentors (Cargo et al., 2003; Chinman & Linney, 1998; Kim et. al, 1998). Though issues regarding relationship building in participatory research with adults are well developed in the literature, they are much less so in regards to youth (Nygren et al., 2006). In the YIP project, a supportive and caring environment was essential to foster many of the outcomes that the youth experienced. Many of the youth found support in the project that they did not find in other areas of their lives. Some of them even referred to the collaborators including coordinators as “family”. The obvious bond that was forged between the project members was a strong incentive to continue their engagement in the project.

The coordinators offered constant encouragement and coaching in regards to the training and research, but also in regards to the youths’ personal lives, mental health, career, school, family and romantic relationships.

*“Support... somebody to look up to that helped to overcome challenges... feeling a place of belonging... to remember that when—have—facing challenges in life. And to learn from the experiences of others that you speak with that, learn what kinds of things they do that stopped them from... taking, like, a bad road. So that’s helping me ‘cause I’m—there, like, all the people that we interviewed in the focus groups they all have, like, a lot to teach everyone”- Youth collaborator # 1*

As other research has highlighted (Nygreen et al., 2006; Poland et al., 2002), we also learned that relationship building with the youth and those important to them (e.g. their young children, close friends, and family) was an essential part of the project that supported their continued success and participation. Among themselves youth also created a network of support. Many shared similar life experiences; and gave each other life and relationship coaching. This coaching at times happened collectively with coordinators’ participation, almost indeed almost like in a family setting. Peer support is known to be essential for positive youth development, like Kidd (2003) we found it particularly vital for street-involved youth who usually have troubled relationships with family.

### ***Democratization of Knowledge***

Hatt (2007) in her article about the construction of the concept of "smartness" among marginalized urban youth recognizes smartness as "socio-culturally produced, rather than being biologically based" (p. 146). The author outlines how the institution of school shapes youth's identity and perceptions about success, their efficacy and abilities intellectual or not and "operates to legitimate academic knowledge over experiential knowledge" (p. 146). Marginalized youth, who find themselves outside these institutions, usually lack confidence in their efficacies and abilities. The institution of schooling also controls who has access to "legitimate knowledge" and therefore controls the dominant conception of what smartness is, shaping individual and/or group identities accordingly. At the trainings, the youth were proud (self-esteem) that they were learning what they

considered university-level skills that could only be accessed by someone with a university degree. There was a real sense that their own internalized oppression and perceptions of themselves as “lesser” for not having a formal education were being shattered. The realization that they too could engage in the same intellectual processes and offer their own knowledge gave them more confidence in themselves and their intellectual capabilities.

*“I have this insecurity in my life, my parents always told me I was stupid and stuff. But I’m starting to accept that I’m actually intelligent”- Youth Collaborator #4*

The process of learning about open coding and later developing their own partial framework (only some of the focus group data was analyzed) illustrates how youth were re-conceptualizing their intellectual capabilities as lay researchers.

*“I have just a grade 12 education. I don’t have college or university. And because what we have learned from them was a university level and how we achieved it so fast was amazing. But my head hurts from it... And we were very close to what they had come up with from doing the coding as a team, like, they [the coordinators] did theirs and uh.. as a team we did ours, right. And it was-- I was even shocked how close we came to finding certain codes...”- Youth Collaborator #6*

*“[W]e are all human beings with—at the same level. Just ‘cause they [the coordinators] have a degree, doesn’t mean they’re smarter than me.”-Youth Collaborator #2*

While most youth found the coding process extremely challenging it was the very fact that they could learn these skills and overcome challenges that built their self-confidence and sense of mastery.

*“It was out of my comfort level but it's like something that needs to be done in a job. That you need to do. It's, like, oh, I don't want to do this but I have to do it and learn it. But I*

*learned it and actually I love coding now." -Youth Collaborator #2*

Through the project, the youth collaborators developed research skills, which they felt were transferable to other areas of their lives such as focus group facilitation skills (e.g. listening, probing), notetaking and data interpretation. These skills translated into more critical thinking and better understanding about group processes and the research issues. For some of the youth, the project gave them an opportunity to network and look for job opportunities. As a result, one of the collaborators did find work in another research project and another began to participate in youth committees around the city. The YIP project also appeared to set a new standard in the research community as the youth who joined the other research project had his honorarium matched to ours. New learning and access to 'legitimate knowledge' opened up new opportunities for these youth.

### ***Self and Social Awareness***

Participation in the research process, including the evaluation, offered the youth collaborators opportunities to reflect on who they are, their community, career choices, and their future. They developed greater self-awareness and social awareness. The process of group engagement was a challenge for the youth collaborators, particularly relating to forming consensus and hearing everyone's opinions. For most of the youth, it was the first time that they had worked in a participatory environment with other youth in collaboration with adults. Similar to what we (the adult coordinators and project researchers) were experiencing, they experienced a process of "relational resocialization" (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009, p. 27) regarding how to work in collaboration among themselves, and with adults. As the youth became more engaged in the group they became more critically aware of work processes and their own abilities to engage with them. Being inclusive and reaching consensus required them to develop listening skills, patience and to be non-judgemental. Most acquired these important skills, and improved their sense of self-efficacy and perception of personal control particularly within their relationships.

*“... I’ve learned to work in a team, it’s very important and I think it’s – one thing I’ve learned... the team—we all bounce ideas back and forth and we work through them. And sometimes if we’re a little over time we realize that and we still push through.”* - **Youth Collaborator #4**

*“Not pissing them off... you’ve got to be non-judgmental and all that... Maintaining the relationships with the people in my work and treating them the way that I want to be treated... that is a big success for me.”* – **Youth Collaborator #1**

Abandoning stereotypes and learning to cooperate has been associated with the development of participatory competence and skills (Cargo et al., 2003). As the project evolved and the paradigm of the project began to shift, there was recognition that youth needed more than just formal training to collect data for the research project; they needed to understand the community issues and know the resources available to them and their peers. Informal opportunities for learning were established. Some of these opportunities, for example partner site visits were paid while others such as attending lectures or community events were optional and voluntary.

During trainings, the importance of maintaining neutrality while leading a focus group was constantly emphasized. Issues relating to empathy and potential prejudices were addressed within the group and in conjunction with the development of active listening skills. It is important to note that even though most of the youth were experiential, some still held prejudices about street life and other street-involved youth. In the beginning of the project, some youth expressed concerns about being judgmental towards study participants, as well as other collaborators. Yet, as the project progressed, youth’s perceptions and stereotypes about street-involved youth were shattered through a process of awareness raising.

*“[F]eeling the judgement around even other co-researchers... so just judgement... learning, taking the knowledge that [the coordinators] taught us about... treating someone like they have something to teach us”* –**Youth Collaborator # 5**

It is very important to acknowledge the heterogeneity that exists among street-involved youth (Frankish, Hwang & Quantz, 2005), and the consequent hierarchies that exist among this group. While there were judgements made among the youth collaborators, there were also judgements and prejudice directed at youth collaborators from study participants during focus groups. On two occasions these judgements were quite explicit and did indeed undermine the confidence and enthusiasm of the youth collaborators who felt hurt and troubled by comments made.

The project allowed youth to gain more knowledge about drug use, the street scene and youth specific community resources and re-evaluate their own perceptions. This realization led to a raised social awareness. For the one youth collaborator who had no direct experience with street life, listening to the stories and experiences of the study participants during focus groups opened his eyes to a lot of the issues these youth face.

*“I’ve become a lot less judgemental of, like, you know, just the-the idea that everybody’s got a story and everybody’s different, you know. Just sort of—I’ve stepped a lot out of my comfort zone, and I think it’s – I think it’s good. I’m a better person now”- Youth Collaborator #3*

For the same youth collaborator the experience of participating in the project and relating to street-involved youth was profoundly transformative in that it led to more awareness about street-involved youth and a newfound sense of social responsibility to affect change:

*“So, I think in the future the way this project has helped it’s like, like, you know, when I ... do sort of reach the goal of where I want to be in 10 years, as well as on the way to that goal, I can sort of give back to the community, like it doesn’t have to be all, like, selfish, you know, give, give, give.” - Youth Collaborator #3*

For another youth who considered herself at-risk, a glimpse into street life had strong salutary effects in preventing her own initiation into street life and culture:

*“Being part of the focus groups allowed me to see into a world without having to be a part of it myself. And understand it better without having to participate in it and that has helped my curiosity for that kind of life because I have more insight into it now.”- Youth Collaborator #1*

Debriefing sessions after every focus group were an essential component in the process of raising awareness. These debriefing sessions lasted approximately 30 minutes. Topics and issues that came up during the focus groups were discussed with two youth collaborators (the facilitator and note-taker) and the two adult coordinators. Within the context of study participants’ and youth collaborators’ lived experiences, we discussed issues collectively regarding facilitation dynamics, as well as discussed issues around drug use, addictions, homelessness, and the sex trade among others. These issues were also discussed during meeting sessions with the entire team, which allowed for reflective learning about their individual and collective work. It was in these sessions and meetings that much of the co-learning happened as youth offered their insights and opinions, which were discussed collectively and allowed for knowledge sharing, development and awareness raising.

Cargo et al. (2003:S72) in their empowerment model links this process of raised awareness with youth’s recognition of their “potential to act on their own and as a group” to address social issues that matter to them; this process allows them to recognize the role that youth can have in social change. Similarly, the youth collaborators recognized that they have the potential to work towards making positive changes in the community and their own lives (increased sense of agency) through collective work and letting go of prejudices (awareness).

## ***Voice and Advocacy***

In the literature, there is a recognition of the ripple effect that individual experiences of participation and empowerment can have on larger scale community changes, as



individuals build their self-esteem and efficacy, gain new skills, and participate in critical thinking and dialogue about their experiences and advocate for changes (Wong et al., 2010; Zimmerman, 1995;).

The YIP project became a platform for the youth to reclaim and value their own voices and narratives. The fact that most of the youth had been hired in part because they themselves have or had experiences with street life and had their own struggles with addictions, gave them new perspectives on their experiences. They began to perceive these experiences as valued knowledge and it created in them a sense of pride (self-esteem) and the motivation to act. They acknowledged that they too had something to contribute to the larger community.

*"I think it's great [the project], we get great information and work with the community and you know instill a sense of pride in the youth doing the project. So helps both people and to help future generations"-Youth Collaborator #5*

In a later interview the same youth goes on to explain how important it is to her that her opinions and voice were heard:

*"I just like enjoy so much, like, being able to observe people in their element and being also able to write about it [as a note taker]. And somebody, like, cares about reading my opinions. Like it feels so good to me...they [the coordinators] sent me the nicest e-mails...they make me feel that I'm smart, like makes me feel so good"- Youth Collaborator #5*

The youth collaborators' voices and new perspectives were not only heard within the project itself, that is, as collaborators in the decisions made within the project, but also in the wider community, including the health research community. The youth (joined by coordinators) presented at two national research conferences: the Canadian Association of HIV Research (CAHR) in Saskatoon and the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) in Toronto. The YIP project presentation had an evident impact at the CAHR

conference; at the closing address we were singularly acknowledged as an inspiring research project and recommendations were made to include more youth in research. Youth collaborators presented about the research and their experiences at the BCCDC at the regular Work In Process (WIP) sessions for employees, and at a community-partner forum organized by the youth and coordinators. At these presentations, it became evident that the youth had gained public speaking skills and developed a strong voice for themselves to advocate for youth and our project. They welcomed and responded to questions from the audience with confidence and accuracy. At the community forum, the youth's presentation and work inspired a lot of confidence in and respect for our project, since some of our partners knew the youth collaborators as clients, and were proud to see their engagement.

In addition, a report about the project with a profile of each youth collaborator was published in the BCCDC newsletter. In the report, youth chose to be very frank and forthright about their past and their struggles, as well as their future goals. One youth in particular described her awoken youth advocate self with great aspirations for the future; another described her assurance that she too has a place among the educated world. These narratives of resilience from street youth in particular are not common in society at large or the research community in particular (Kidd & Davidson, 2007). Checkoway & Richards-Schuster (2004) recognize that these stories of youth participation and success are important to present to society, as a way to challenge dominant views about youth, that is, seeing youth as capable collaborators in research rather than other pathological labels, challenges stereotypes and may contribute to the current paradigm shift towards viewing youth as assets and potential allies.

## **Discussion**

Paterson & Panessa (2008) reflect that the literature on the engagement of at-risk youth seldom accounts for the “interconnection between substance use, homelessness, poverty and mental health illness in the engagement of at-risk youth” (p.30). From the onset of

participation by the youth, we realized the amount of support and time that would need to be invested in youth development that went beyond mere skills training. Difficulties in one's personal life were considered the major barriers or challenges for most youth collaborators to participate in the project. Some of the challenges identified were homelessness, addiction (past or present), challenges of being a mother, mental health issues and chronic health concerns (being HIV or Hep. C. positive), unhealthy relationships, dealing with childhood traumas, and poverty.

Though youth identified that the project helped improve their mental health and gave them more motivation to do well in other areas of their lives; it was soon evident that when their personal lives were not going well, the quality of their participation declined and absenteeism increased. Like previous participatory research with street-involved youth (Harper & Carver, 1999), we recognize the importance of not excluding youth from the project because of their particular life struggles or circumstances. Rather projects should try to make provisions to accommodate and support them. The fact that four youth did not meet the clearly defined expectations in the beginning of the project, and were asked to leave had some negative impacts on the group cohesion and trust. A few felt threatened and upset that some of the youth had to be let go. Maintaining the team together was important to help create a sense of belonging, continuity and stability.

Check-ins and check outs at trainings were an important part of the trainings. Usually youth had so many personal issues to deal with that they found check-ins helped with their participation that day. Though including check-ins and outs may be time consuming, they are an invaluable way to acknowledge their own processes, and offer the necessary support, especially among vulnerable groups such as this one. Considering the fact that at-risk youth "are often fiercely protective of their autonomy and cynical about personnel in helper roles" (Paterson & Panessa, 2008, p. 26), it is crucial to not use what May (1972) (as cited in Wong et al., 2010) has called "nutrient power" that is, creating a purely helping relationship within the adult-youth relationship, but rather one that reflects collective decision-making and promotes problem-solving skills (Kidd, 2003).

The relationships that were forged within the group went beyond just working relationships and as mentioned were essential in maintaining youth's continued participation in the project. This commitment to building relationships with the youth also brought with it many new responsibilities for the coordinators. For example, the coordinators developed a deep and personal sense of responsibility for the collective and individual wellbeing of the youth. This meant that on many occasions the coordinators needed to meet with youth or talk to them on the phone outside working hours. Team building activities were arranged regularly. When youth did not show up to training and/or meetings, coordinators needed to follow up with them. The requirement of extra time in participatory research beyond initial expectations is a common feature in other research projects (Checkoway & Richars-Schuster, 2004; Van Staa et al., 2010), and needs to be accounted for during planning stages of the project.

Given that most of us were fairly new to this form of engagement with youth, though we acknowledged that we were ready to support the youth, there were things that we did not know or could not offer, such as professional counseling for example. As a few of the youth approached us with serious confidential concerns, we tried to forge solutions collectively, and we referred them to the appropriate resources. To support youth fully, we realized from the beginning that we needed to reach out to our more experienced community partners who could offer many of the resources that the youth needed (and that we could not offer). Among other things, we were able to recruit from one of our community partners a youth counselor to be assigned to the project. Though some youth demonstrated interest and a need to meet with the counselor, very few did. We recognize that though we did invite the counselor on one occasion to meet the youth; we could have tried to include her more fully into the project. A possible solution would have been a strategy piloted by Harper & Carver (1999) of bringing the counselor to the youth. We could have allowed youth to see the counselor during working hours. Including the counselor and having more direct contact with our other community partners could have been beneficial for the coordinators as well as the youth, and could possibly have helped improve group dynamics and facilitation.

As is common in partnerships and group processes within participatory research (Cargo & Mercer, 2008), conflicts within the group were not uncommon. Since formal education was never a criterion for being hired, there were very different learning levels and capabilities. In order to accommodate these levels, some youth required more one-to-one learning, or sometimes the trainings needed to be slowed down. It was important to accommodate those with the most needs, while at the same time keeping the others engaged. These differences created unequal power relations within the group that caused quite a lot of resentment. It is important to make sure all youth's voice and opinions are equally valued and heard in group processes, so that resentment against youth who are most vocal or excel (or vice-versa) does not occur.

Considering project sustainability is crucial if the outcomes of the process of participation is to be maintained, and does not lead to resentment, disappointment and a sense of failure by participants (Flicker, 2008; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). As the budget dwindled and Phase 2 neared its end, the youth became less cooperative both among themselves and with the coordinators, and absenteeism increased. As they explained, they were anxious and resentful that the project was coming to an end. The project they felt had been an anchor of support for them for the past 12 months, and they felt worried about what would come next. The coordinator became increasingly concerned to keep group cohesion even after the project had ended by promoting group activities and opportunities. A resume clinic was held to help youth look for alternate work opportunities; and we continued to do presentations at conferences and even in a university class setting. Most importantly, we collectively wrote and applied for a youth grant to continue our work in the community; this application process gave youth further learning and networking opportunities.

As the project evolved youth collaborators took on new roles and responsibilities such as fundraising for a silent auction at BCCDC, and attending conferences. Some youth found it hard to juggle personal life with increased work demand. The fact that most of the extra work was volunteer caused disgruntlement among some of the youth. The youth highly

valued the stipend they received, which was for most an important supplement to their regular income. Though most saw their volunteer time as a way to show their support to the project, many felt resentful that some were showing more commitment than others but reaping the same benefits (i.e. going to conferences). Thus, it is important to find the fine balance between allowing youth an opportunity to show their support through volunteering, and not unjustly overburdening their already challenging day-to-day life, and making sure work is fairly distributed. As Minkler (1978) reminds us it is important not to unfairly place the burden of change on the already poor and powerless.

Given the evolving nature of the project, we encountered the constant challenge of how to include the youth within a project design that did not plan for meaningful participation and empowerment (youth development). At the very onset of the project and throughout it, there needed to be a continuous discussion within the research team about the different aspects of inclusion. As the youth began to excel beyond expectations, some in note-taking and coding, others in facilitation and public speaking, and as the group showed signs of growth and empowerment, the coordinators as well as the youth began to insist upon and request more participation and involvement. However, the reality was that there was not enough resources allotted within the project timeline and budget for full participation. As Laverack & Labonte (2000) have suggested we took each stride at a time overcoming problems that arose at every stage.

Thus, some of the priorities of the project began to change, and more resources and time began to be spent on youth development and capacity building (e.g. extra trainings, and team building activities). This did indeed compromise the original budget of the project and our dissemination veered from the study's original plan. However, as we described, the project offered new opportunities for learning and knowledge creation through working in close collaboration with the youth. Perhaps most important, veering from the original study plan provided the youth with new opportunities to promote their own resiliency and empowerment, and also have their voices and opinions heard.

## Limitations

This research study had some limitations. Given that the research was participatory, it is a limitation that the evaluation itself was not, for its most part, designed within a participatory framework, due to time and budget constraints. Nonetheless, all the youth expressed their approval and support of the evaluation process, and some commented that being interviewed gave them a valuable opportunity to reflect on the project, their own life, and experiences. Throughout the evaluation process we made sure to clarify to the youth that they were not being evaluated individually, but rather we were evaluating the project itself and the work of the coordinators, to learn about the process and address emergent needs and concerns. Furthermore, the youth collaborators were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft of this paper. Because the interviews were done at certain periods of time, the responses and feedback may have been time specific (e.g. related to feelings on that day and time), rather than reflect an overall perspective on the project. This was definitely the case with one interview, for which the youth collaborator later requested to be re-interviewed to better reflect his genuine feelings about the project.

Another limitation could have been the fact that the youth collaborators were interviewed by the project coordinator in the first round and by one of the project adult researchers and by a project volunteer and employee of BCCDC in the second round of interviews. This may have led to response bias, since some of the youth particularly in the beginning of the project, may have refrained from making negative comments about the project. Given the level of trust and openness that was developed between the youth and adult researchers from the onset of the project, the fact that they were interviewed by someone directly connected to the project may have led youth to be more comfortable in offering their opinions and criticisms, and may actually have enriched the data collection. The use of fieldnotes and observations as well as member checking allowed for cross-checking and internal validation of research findings.

## Conclusion

As Checkoway & Richards-Schuster (2004) note: “Youth participation in evaluation and research can be conceived as part of a new way of knowing about young people as resources in society.” (p. 94). As we engage youth we begin to participate in a process of co-learning and knowledge exchange between youth and adults that is quite recent. This process of inclusion and collaboration can serve as a reaffirmation of what youth can do and as a way to express their potentiality to society (Pittman et al., 2003). This is particularly important for marginalized street-involved youth who are stigmatized by society at large and have been offered few meaningful, positive opportunities to develop their existing strengths, or express and develop their talents and agency (Kidd, 2003). Though there are many challenges to involving experiential youth in research, this study has demonstrated that participatory research can be an important avenue to promote street-involved youth resiliency and empowerment, foster the democratization of knowledge, and offer important avenues to challenge the prevailing risk paradigm. In a time of economic down turn, and decreasing resources for project funding (Flicker, 2008), we recognize that issues of cost and efficiency are important. Nonetheless, this project has shown that meaningful participation in research can offer important avenues to develop employable skills, positive youth development and wellness. Considerations of cost and time commitment must be made with the realization that there are indeed benefits that are impossible to be measured solely through monetary means. Though modest, this study hopes to contribute to and promote a continued dialogue about marginalized youth in our society; the values we place on their participation, and the avenues or spaces we are willing to offer them to hear their voices and give them the agency to define themselves, their intellectual capabilities, needs and abilities, rather than have society at large and the research community in particular, contain them into a box labeled: "Don't move- high risk."



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