

## **Youth-Guided Youth Engagement: Participatory Action Research (PAR) With High-Risk, Marginalized Youth**

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YOUTH 4 YEG TEAM

*Engaging youth who live with high-risk, marginalized conditions presents a significant challenge in our society, considering the prevalence of disconnect and distrust they often experience within their social environments/systems. Yet, meaningful youth engagement is a key concept not only for youth development, but also for a systems change to more effectively support high-risk youth and families. This article presents a framework of youth engagement developed over 9 months, using participatory action research (PAR) with 16 youth leaders in a community-based research team. Although this framework has incorporated the youth leaders' lived experiences, talents, and voices, positive youth development (PYD) and social justice youth development (SJYD) have theoretically contextualized our research. Youth*

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*leaders guided the framework's development, including the identification of key themes/dimensions, definitions, and practical examples. The framework's three components—"Basis" (philosophy and principles), "What" (goals/outcomes), and "How" (actions/processes/pathways to change)—are supported by nine themes described in this article.*

**KEYWORDS** *at-risk youth, community engagement, high-risk youth, youth development, youth engagement*

Marginalized populations are systematically prevented from accessing opportunities and resources that are normally available to others, and that are critical to enabling them to reach their full potential and become contributing members of society (Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Wearing, 2011). The impacts of marginalization are compounded for urban-based youth who are at high-risk of poverty, homelessness, social exclusion, violence, racism, discrimination, mental health challenges, and/or stigma (Abela & Hankin, 2008; Guibord, Bell, Romano, & Rouillard, 2011; Valdez, Lambert, & Ialongo, 2011). Not only are "marginalized" youth not well engaged in meaningful relationships, but they often have limited connections to community supports through programs and services (Davidson, Wien, & Anderson, 2010; Ramey, Busseri, Khanna, & Rose-Krasnor, 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). Such exclusion and disengagement can magnify inequities and disadvantages and lead to poor developmental outcomes (Berkman & Kawachi, 2000; Siegrist, 2000). As a result, compromised outcomes among youth who live with high-risk, marginalized conditions have become a growing concern locally/regionally, nationally, and globally (Bashant, 2007; Gemert, Peterson, & Lien, 2008; Johnson & Taliaferro, 2012; Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009). Within the context of this article, "marginalized" youth refer to youth who are often socially excluded from accessing opportunities and resources and who are at high risk of and vulnerable to poverty, homelessness, abusive behaviors, racism, discrimination, stigma, mental health challenges, and/or compromised developmental outcomes (Abela & Hankin, 2008; Guibord et al., 2011; Valdez et al., 2011).

Programs for "marginalized" youth are typically operated by specific agency-based agenda at various levels (e.g., municipal, provincial, federal) and in a range of sectors (e.g., education, social work, health) (Davidson et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007; Wexler et al., 2009). The lack of youth engagement and multi-level, cross-sectorial coordination results in a fragmented service-delivery model difficult for "marginalized" youth to navigate as they often lack the necessary relationships and resources (Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). The fragmentation and discrimination embedded in existing institutions are key factors sustaining poor development

outcomes for youth who live with “high-risk, marginalized” conditions (Wexler et al., 2009). Transformational change at a systems level is required to meet their needs more appropriately (Bashant, 2007; Gemert et al., 2008; Wearing, 2011); promoting the optimal development of marginalized youth is a responsibility that must be shared (Curran, Bowness, & Comack, 2010; Lynam & Cowley, 2007).

This article presents a key initial milestone of our research project, using a youth-oriented approach and working with community–university partners to address the need for social change. Its primary aim is to more effectively support youth who live with high-risk, marginalized conditions, by emphasizing youth engagement and development. It is important to stress that the most innovative and unique aspect of our research is its youth-guided/led approach to fill a gap in research on youth engagement and development (Bulanda et al., 2013; McKay, Saunders, & Wroblewski, 2011; Richards-Schuster & Aludana, 2013). In particular, this involves the significant role of youth leaders in our research, especially our ongoing relationship-building with our youth leaders and their contribution to guiding our research. Specifically, this includes the youth-led development of our framework for youth engagement through using/honoring youth’s language, creativity, and lived experiences.

## YOUTH ENGAGEMENT RESEARCH PROJECT

Since the principal investigator (PI) of this research project moved to a western Canadian city in the summer of 2011, he has met over 200 community and university stakeholders through a series of community dialogue sessions in and around the City. These stakeholders have been identified mostly using the networks through a community-based organization housed within the PI’s academic unit. These community consultations have suggested that a most pressing community issue is to more effectively support high-risk youth living in marginalized conditions such as poverty, homelessness, social exclusion, mental health challenges, abusive behaviors, school drop-out, and/or stigma. Consequently, a “youth engagement” research team has been developed, consisting of diverse partners from cross-sectorial community agencies (e.g., youth and multicultural agencies, municipal and provincial governments) and interdisciplinary departments (e.g., social work, human ecology, public health), and including sixteen youth leaders (e.g., Aboriginal and immigrant youth) from various youth and multicultural agencies/programs across the City.

A series of team meetings have led to a consensus that the target goals/outcomes for the project are social change and transformation of the system to more effectively support optimal development of marginalized youth through actively engaging youth in working collaboratively with community and university partners. In particular, our team has unanimously

agreed that to achieve this goal, this research should be youth-oriented and that the research process should be guided/led by youth. Consequently, the focus of our research is on honoring/highlighting the voices of high-risk, marginalized youth and mobilizing youth into a systems change. The improvement of support systems (policy and practice) and environments (neighborhoods, schools, and communities), as guided by youth, is a key objective in our larger project.

While using this youth-oriented approach, we aim to dialogue with partners including youth leaders, practitioners, government policymakers, and academic researchers, as to how to improve youth engagement at personal, family, and community levels. This project uses a participatory action research (PAR) process to address the following overarching research question: *How can practices and policies around engagement at personal, family, and community levels be changed to enhance youths' capacity to mobilize the resources needed to promote their positive development?* Participatory Action Research (PAR) is “a systematic, participatory approach to inquiry that enables people to extend their understanding of problems or issues and to formulate actions directed toward the resolution of those problems or issues” (Stringer & Genat, 2004). This project is one of the first of its kind to engage multiple partners (including and centered around youth) and support/mobilize them in shaping the collaborative process to produce knowledge that is more relevant and readily applied than traditional approaches allow (Allensworth, 2011; Miles, Espiritu, Horen, Sebian, & Waetzig, 2010).

Lind (2008) showed the power of PAR in working with youth as research partners to mobilize a research agenda, by promoting mutual respect, co-learning, as well as relationship, trust, and capacity-building. The key principles of PAR (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Petersson, Springett, & Blomqvist, 2009; Reason & Bradbury, 2008; Simich, Waiter, Moorlag, & Ochocka, 2009; Stringer & Genat, 2004) include:

- (a) equal participation by partners based on mutual respect and trust in promoting co-learning and mutual capacity building, while valuing community people's lived experiences and professionals' practical knowledge and experiences (beyond academic/scientific knowledge);
- (b) power-sharing (e.g., shared decision-making) and co-ownership of research within a team that leads to empowerment of those involved; and
- (c) critical dialogues and reflections within the team to implement actions for positive changes.

### The Involvement of Youth Leaders

Our “youth engagement” team has been operative for over three years funded by several community-based research grants including the

establishment of a partnership in which we are all invested. Our agency partners oversee grass-roots youth groups and provide programs for youth, including those who live with high-risk, marginalized conditions. Partners from ten agencies (including provincial and municipal government agencies, provincial health systems, local school systems, multicultural community organizations, and nonprofit youth agencies) that serve high-risk and at-risk youth have identified and recommended youth leaders who have been trained to facilitate these programs. These youth leaders have relevant qualifications (e.g., interpersonal, communication, and leadership skills) and diverse experiences (e.g., homelessness, foster care, abusive behaviors) and are connected to and trusted by local youth communities. Youth leaders who have been recruited and have joined our research team are aged 16 to 24 ( $n = 21$ ) with both genders, including Aboriginal and immigrant leaders.

Our youth leaders have met over 60 times so far since October 2012. The structure of these semi-monthly three-hour meetings is youth-oriented, including youth-led icebreaker activities, small group sessions, and all-inclusive dialogues (e.g., talking circles). Discussion on the term “youth engagement” has been completed including the meanings and key factors of youth engagement, and barriers and facilitators to youth engagement, by documenting youth voices. To collaboratively plan for upcoming team meetings, youth leaders take turns to attend planning meetings and set agendas. In between meetings, youth leaders are assigned to complete homework such as researching various approaches used by community agencies ( $n =$  over 30) in the city, and writing down personal replies to specific questions that are designed to facilitate dialogues on agenda items at an upcoming session. Using this youth-guided process including our youth leaders’ contribution to planning of each meeting, we ensure that our youth leaders’ expertise and insights are being incorporated into the structure of the meetings.

At a series of meetings, the youth leaders have discussed and identified the key components of a framework for youth engagement. These include (a) philosophy and principles (“Basis”), (b) goals/outcomes (“What”), and (c) actions/processes/pathways to change (“How”). This collaborative, youth-driven process has led to the identification of nine (9) organized themes of Basis, What, and How. These themes focus on relationship building, co-learning, mutual understanding and respect, and the use of strengths-based, growth-oriented approaches at various system and community levels. This article presents the details about our framework of youth engagement, developed by our youth leaders. This framework is an impressive outcome/milestone of ongoing hard work by the youth leaders between October 2012 and June 2013 through a series of semi-monthly three-hour meetings among them, in working with the PI and two graduate research assistants. This framework is currently being pilot-tested.

## Context: Literature-Guided Conceptual Foundation

This research has conceptually been guided by a blend of both *positive youth development* (PYD) that focuses on individual skill building, engagement, and empowerment, as well as *social justice youth development* (SJYD) that emphasizes building youth's self-awareness of how race, sex/gender, class, and other dimensions of power affect their lives. First, *positive youth development* (PYD; Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008) seeks to promote a variety of developmental competencies that young people need at individual, social, and system levels to become productive, contributing members of society. Rather than a pathological focus, PYD adopts a holistic view of development by emphasizing the strengths, resources, and potentials of youth, and holds positive expectations regarding young people's growth and development and the contributions they can make to society (Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008). PYD's conceptual framework illustrates how the promotion of competencies both at individual-level and system-level changes lead to desired youth development outcomes (Commission on Positive Youth Development, 2005; Delgado, 2002; Durlak et al., 2007; Geldhof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013).

*Meaningful youth engagement* at personal, family, and community levels is a key concept for PYD (Davidson et al., 2010; Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). Meaningful youth engagement involves listening and responding to youth (Caine & Boydell, 2010), equitable power-sharing between youth and adults, critical reflection and reflective action, and social change (Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Pearrow, 2008). For example, in YouthScape, an initiative in five communities across Canada (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009), relationship-building was identified as the top overarching practice for working with youth who often have trust issues and may have experienced difficulties in relationships (e.g., neglect, abusive relationship, lack of intimate and secure relationship). Blanchet-Cohen and Salazar (2009) emphasized that the meaningful engagement of marginalized youth requires moving away from the dominant hierarchy of relationships in which adults are providers and youth are receivers, to a more equal, collaborative model of relationships.

Another theory that guides our research is *social justice youth development* (SJYD). SJYD is explicitly concerned with transforming community conditions, such as inequitable power relations and conditions that are oppressive to youth and families (Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011). Specifically, SJYD involves a critical analysis of race; gender; culture; and social, economic, and political factors to address the root causes of community problems (Suleiman, Soleimanpour, & London, 2006; Wilson et al., 2006). The SJYD is theorized to involve the three levels of self, community, and global awareness that operate to expand youth consciousness to higher levels of social criticality and human compassion through social justice in youth

development. The first level (Awareness of Self) involves developing a critical self-awareness of how power and privilege intersect with an individual's sex, gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and other human dimensions in ways that create and/or constrain their life opportunities. The second level (Awareness of Community) involves developing awareness of oppressive forces in their community (e.g., how social and economic conditions that contextualize young people's lives contribute to the fracturing of their identities), including racist policies and procedures. The third level (Awareness of Others) involves looking at both oppression and opportunities for solidarity at a global scale. This level of awareness is developed through learning about how their struggles connect with others' struggles throughout the world, thereby engendering a sense of belonging and connection to a global community.

A case study by a youth–adult partnership called the Healthy Options for Prevention and Education (HOPE) Coalition (Ross, 2011) suggests that to effectively address oppressive conditions that influence youth, a blend of PYD's focus on individual skill building, engagement, and empowerment—joined with SJYD's emphasis on building youth's self-awareness of how race, gender, class, and other dimensions of power affect their lives on a daily basis—is needed. Consequently, our research theoretically builds on the key concepts presented by both PYD and SJYD.

Significant gaps in the literature that were revealed by our review are concerned with limited efforts devoted to the appreciation toward and use of a youth-guided/led approach to engagement of youth with high-risk conditions. These seem understandable, considering the influences of systemic factors such as power imbalance between providers (adults) and users (youths) at both service and policy levels (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009). Yet, Durlak et al.'s (2007) comprehensive review article summarizing the effects of PYD programs on school, family, and community systems emphasized that “youth should not be overlooked as important contributors to system change. More studies are needed of attempts to empower youth to take the initiative in changing systems” (p. 278). In fact, the key ingredients of effective and meaningful youth engagement include: mutually respectful and nonjudgmental relationship-building to promote a sense of trust and connectedness, and strong excitement and passion for mobilizing into positive changes at personal, family, and community (e.g., practice and policy) levels (Fogel, 2004; Jones, 2011; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Surko et al., 2005; Wexler et al., 2009). Studies support the importance of positive youth engagement as a potential means of promoting positive developmental outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, connectedness, mental health, empowerment, family relationships and functioning) of marginalized youth (Lind, 2008; Preyde et al., 2011; Ramey et al., 2010; Simpkins et al., 2008; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009) in a variety of life contexts, both within and outside of service domains.

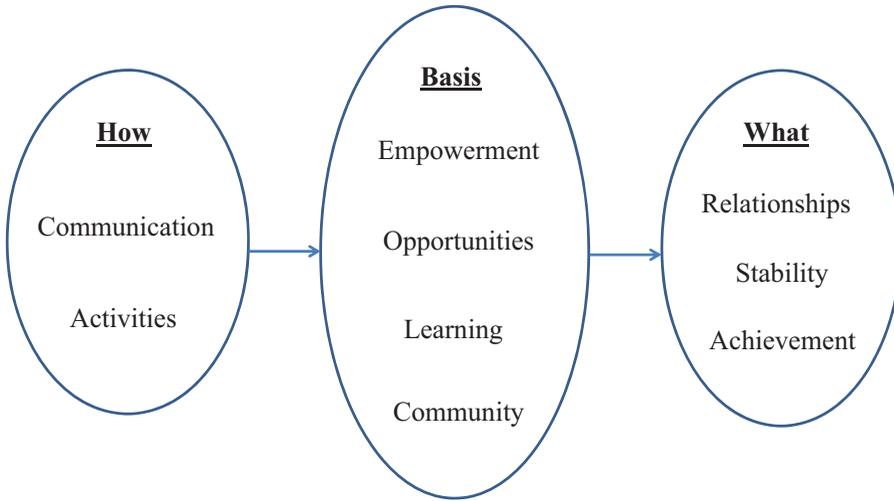
Furthermore, the SJYD aims to enhance youth awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). By critically understanding the role of oppression in maintaining the structural inequality that underlies issues youth face (Arches, 2012; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002), the SJYD enables youth to engage in actions to address these oppressive conditions (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Consequently, our overall research focuses on the purposeful use of youth leadership to facilitate youth engagement in a variety of contexts such as youth programs and services, schools and educational/capacity-building domains, and/or, potentially, a systems change (e.g., policy change) to address the gaps in research described above.

### FRAMEWORK OF YOUTH ENGAGEMENT DEVELOPED BY YOUTH LEADERS

At a series of meetings through both small- and large-group activities, youth leaders have discussed and identified the key components of a framework for youth engagement. These include: (a) philosophy and principles (“Basis”), (b) goals/outcomes (“What”), and (c) actions/processes/pathways to change (“How”). The youth leaders’ voices, talents, and lived experiences have guided brainstorming, dialogue, and interpretation sessions at the meetings. This collaborative, youth-driven process has led to the identification of nine (9) organized themes within the categories Basis, What, and How:

- *Basis (Philosophy/Principles)*: (1) Empowerment, (2) Opportunity, (3) Learning, (4) Community
- *What (Outcomes/Goals)*: (5) Relationships, (6) Stability, (7) Achievements
- *How (Actions/Processes)*: (8) Communication, (9) Activities

By synthesizing diverse ideas originated from a series of meetings and individual homework, the youth leaders have worked together to develop definitions of the nine organized themes, along with a number of examples to illustrate these themes. The four themes: (1) Empowerment, (2) Opportunity, (3) Learning, and (4) Community constitute the *Basis* of our youth engagement framework. These act as the Philosophy or Principles when developing and implementing a youth engagement plan. The three themes: (5) Relationships, (6) Stability, and (7) Achievements represent the *What* of our framework. These are considered desirable Outcomes or Goals. Finally, the two themes: (8) Communication and (9) Activities are about the *How* of the framework. These represent Actions or Processes. In practice, however, Communication (Theme 8) and Activities (Theme 9) are used to achieve the goals of promoting Relationships (Theme 5), Stability (Theme 6), and



**FIGURE 1** Relationships among the key components of the framework for youth engagement.

Achievements (Theme 7) through enhancing Empowerment (Theme 1), Opportunity (Theme 2), Learning (Theme 3), and Community (Theme 4). This proposed relationship among the themes is illustrated in Figure 1.

This section of the article provides a description of each of the nine themes and its illustrations for practical application as originally co-written by our youth leaders using their language, creativity, and lived experiences, along with a brief summary of the PYD and SJYD literature that supports each theme.

### Basis: Philosophy/Principles

#### EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment means to enable youth to recognize their abilities and potentials by helping them develop the confidence to implement positive changes in their lives. That is, empowerment is about gaining the confidence and feeling that youth *can* and *will* be able to succeed; having the power to conquer the challenges with an ongoing action plan (see below for more about addressing challenges/barriers).

Support and encouragement are needed to enable youths to recognize and enhance their abilities and strengths. Such support and accommodation should aim to *meet youths where they are at personally* in order to promote confidence. It is important to learn about each and every youth as an individual by building a relationship. By doing that we are able to relate to the youth on a personal level such as knowing if they have any issues and what they feel comfortable with. This helps to facilitate activities or workshops

that cater to every youth, enabling the youth to perform in a much more successful manner. Personalizing the activities/workshops allows youths to feel cared for and to know that they matter, thus encouraging them to perform to their full potentials. Rather than forcing youth to do things, it is essential to engage youths by starting off where they are personally at, physically/socially (e.g., safe, comfortable location), mentally, intellectually, and emotionally.

When youth feel discouraged, it is important to encourage them to feel positive and help them believe in their abilities and potentials. This encouragement helps youths find inside of them a purpose and inner strength that lift them up and helps them feel good about themselves. *Lifting youth up* means lifting the spirits of the youths and encouraging them to feel happy and enhance their self-esteem, for example, through constructive activities or simply having someone to talk to. Lifting youth up involves giving youths who are going through a difficult time or youths who feel discouraged or alone hope that they can rise up and continue their lives in order to achieve their goals. Lifting youth up is to enable youth to find their voice when they feel silenced and to provide them with opportunities to stand strong and empowered.

Youth often encounter individual challenges and/or systemic barriers (e.g., racism and other forms of discrimination). It is important to approach individual and systemic barriers with honesty and on a case by case basis. This means that we acknowledge that barriers exist, and we may not be able to overcome or fully eliminate them but we take them into consideration—not being shallow about issues when we approach each youth. Approaching individual and systematic barriers with honesty also involves making sure that advice given is honest and truthful. Rather than dismissing every issue as a typical occurrence, it is essential to address every issue faced by each youth with respect and dignity. This involves self-reflection, assessment, and analysis of their lives and circumstances. Upon recognition and reflection, youth can gain control over the barriers and then deal with them more effectively. For example, youth may face challenges with drugs and alcohol. A barrier to meeting the challenge may be the lack of knowledge of and access to appropriate services. When youths become aware of their strengths and weaknesses and also able to properly identify a problem or barrier surrounding them, they can feel much more powerful on the inside. This feeling and awareness then leads youths to find a solution allowing them to overcome or better address barriers in personal life. By supporting self-awareness, learning, and growth and learning, we can aid youths to feel empowered by enabling them to more constructively address barriers.

Another key approach to enhancing youth's empowerment is to enable *inspirational changes* in youth. For example, "inspirational, relatable" speakers from particular backgrounds who have succeeded to overcome

challenging experiences can be invited to talk to youth. The goal of inspirational change is to inspire others to also change in a positive way. This is a model effect—seeing relatable individuals overcome challenges often inspires youth to want to do the same.

Both PYD and SJYD support the importance of empowerment. Positive, meaningful youth engagement has been shown to promote empowerment (Durlak et al., 2007; Lind, 2008; Preyde et al., 2011; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009), whereas empowerment is a key outcome from self-awareness and action that are developed through critique of cultural stereotypes and active engagement in identity development as presented in SJYD (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011).

An example of promoting empowerment includes a “talent show.” The essence of this talent show is to welcome all types of talents in an inclusive and nonjudgmental way. Talents come in every form and size such as: being a good singer, a great actor/actress, a great mathematician, and a great public speaker, as well as having a talent in teaching, the ability to bring unity among people, being able to speak different languages, working with computers, and having a talent in drawing, painting, and other creative activities.

This talent show can be done with “improv” or improvisation to promote empowerment, for example, in a youth-service setting. “Improv” refers to acting on-the-spot with no script—“you create as you go along.” This involves reacting in the moment and reacting to one’s environment and inner feelings through, for example, the practice of acting, dancing, singing, playing a musical instrument, creating artworks, and problem solving together. These forms of improvisation enable youth to be creative and imaginative so that they recognize and discover such abilities/talents and promote confidence and empowerment.

#### OPPORTUNITIES

Opportunities are chances and outlets (planned or spontaneous) that help facilitate action towards a particular goal or achievement. Providing resources and support for youth to achieve the goal is important. Having a way to achieve a certain goal is seen as *doors open*—it is essential for youth to take an initiative and be open to experiences and resources to better themselves. Rather than imposing opportunities, asking youth what kind of opportunities they actually want and need is important to cultivate youth’s ability to pursue self-enhancement.

Opportunities are provided in spaces that enable youth to grow and learn in a safe, open, honest, and stimulating environment. This *growth-oriented enabling space* is a place where youths feel free to express themselves and where there is no judgement—a *judgement-free zone*. In this

safe, judgement-free space, the youths can try different, positive things and by doing so, they can find or cultivate a passion and their potentials. Consequently, a place that enables youths to grow is a space where they are challenged—they can learn life lessons such as the importance of perseverance and hard work.

In addition, creating a space/opportunity to form relationships is important. This *relationship-building space* is a place where there is a sense of unity so that everyone has an opportunity to work together and collaborate on a project or a task, which helps build relationships. This space is also a place, in which there is mutual respect; providing youth with an opportunity to know how it feels to have a healthy, positive relationship is important.

Opportunities also offer chances to better youth's life. These are chances in which they can grow and develop their potentials and improve themselves. Those include unique opportunities such as travelling to another country and seeing a different world, experiencing a different culture at a heritage-day event, and having a chance to improve creative skills and express one's self more fully and freely, for example, through arts.

Furthermore, it is important to take actions to provide youths with resources and opportunities. For example, youth leaders can take an initiative to put information out there for youths and encourage them to seek opportunities (e.g., educational, social, cultural) through word of mouth, community outreach, social media, etc. (i.e., connecting youths through communication). These youth-led actions to aid youths in finding resources and opportunities can help youth feel connected and empowered.

PYD's conceptual framework stresses providing youth with a variety of meaningful opportunities to promote competencies leading to positive youth development outcomes (Commission on Positive Youth Development, 2005; Delgado, 2002; Durlak et al., 2007; Geldhof et al., 2013). On the other hand, SJYD allows youth the opportunity to think critically about their social, economic, and political conditions that impact their lives, and then engage in actions to address these conditions (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). In particular, SJYD involves looking at both oppression and opportunities for solidarity at a broad, global scale, thereby engendering a sense of belonging and connection to a wider, global community (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011).

Opportunities can take a number of different forms from networking, self-care, and education to exploration (e.g., field trips) and participation in career/job fairs, youth conferences, and educational classes in whatever youth is interested. For example, if youth is passionate about music, opportunities for playing and/or appreciating music can be provided. Other opportunities to learn include workshops where youth gain hands on experiences. Youth can take home these experiences and use them and share/teach them

to other youths. These hands on experiences enable youths to gain and remember positive learnings and redo and practice them by themselves and/or in working with other youths. Another example of an opportunity is to allow/encourage youths to work for a particular organization that they are interested in, for instance, through internships, as a means of gaining valuable work experiences and networking. This gives the youths a chance to develop their skills and meet others that may inspire them to keep working at improving themselves.

## LEARNING

Learning involves actively providing youths with a variety of meaningful experiences in various situations and fostering interactions with a diversity of people in order to allow them to develop and practice valuable skills. Learning takes place not necessarily only in a formal, academic setting, but involves being challenged to think critically and adapt to different situations and environments. Our youth leaders emphasized the importance of *co-learning* or *mutual learning*—there is no one teacher and no one student—we are learning from each other in a reciprocal way. Importantly, youths should be respectfully acknowledged as resourceful individuals who can provide the key sources of learning about the issues central to youths (e.g., relationship-building with youths, personal and social issues).

Through learning, youth can *acquire new knowledge and skills*. These include both academic and nonacademic skills such as communication skills, social skills, networking skills, team-building skills, life skills, leadership skills, and any skills that can be used in the work force. For example, life skills can range from cooking, cleaning, and financial literacy to job-prep skills (e.g., resume writing, interview practice), time-management, people skills, and anything that makes living possible and meaningful. Such knowledge and skills can be learned through both formal (e.g., structured education) and informal (e.g., personal and social life experiences) education/learning.

Encouraging *critical thinking* is essential for learning. Critical thinking involves rationally analyzing a situation or information, reading in between the lines, and thinking before speaking and acting. Critical thinking is about thinking beyond what is given, considering a bigger picture, and thinking about all the possible perspectives that can be involved, as well as evaluating all the possible solutions and outcomes.

Learning is a critical factor in PYD to promote a variety of developmental competencies at individual, social, and system levels to become productive, contributing members of society, by emphasizing youth's strengths and potentials (Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008). On the other hand, SJYD involves awareness and learning about the role of

oppression in maintaining the structural inequality that underlies the issues youth face (Arches, 2012; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Specifically, SJYD involves a critical analysis of race, gender, culture, and socioeconomic and political factors to address the root causes of community problems such as inequitable power relations and conditions (e.g., poverty, unequal educational opportunities) that are oppressive to youth and families (Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011; Suleiman, Soleimanpour, & London, 2006; Wilson et al., 2006).

Examples of learning include learning to communicate, interact/socialize, and facilitate (e.g., leadership skills), allowing youth *to be experts of their own experiences*—this means that individuals uphold and respect each other's personal lived experiences. More specifically, this means that we accept that youths have knowledge of certain things that adults may not have and allow them to have that knowledge without being judgmental about the knowledge. These personal lived experiences and knowledge enable youths to feel that they are competent, not just as children who are growing up but as people who are at an important stage in their lives. This gives them more insights into certain things that other people may not have. Expert of their own experiences also means that youths are the ones taking the initiative in every opportunity given to them. By doing that they become the ones creating how they would like to experience each opportunity. Each youth has or owns his or her personal lived experiences, which only the youth can know the details—no experiences are more right or wrong.

Another example for learning involves experts coming in and giving an inspirational presentation or workshop about their own experiences, relatable to many youth. Youth can gain knowledge about, for example, key human values (e.g., hard work, perseverance, positive and hopeful thinking, connections with “positive” people) by listening to the speakers' personal experiences that may resonate with youth. Listening to how someone who can relate to youth has dealt with their life challenges can inspire the youth to think about how they can overcome their own challenges—this involves active listening, critical thinking, interaction, reflection, adaptation, and application.

## COMMUNITY

Our youth leaders have defined that community is a collective group of people that get together to create and maintain a supportive and reliable network in order to foster healthy, meaningful relationships. Importantly, community can be a “safety net” that allows people who genuinely care for one another to continuously support and encourage each other and work together to better address community issues. Relationship-building, sense of belonging,

and the provision of support are important elements of community. Examples for developing a sense of community include hosting a community or neighborhood BBQ, an arts-to-“decorate”-the community event, a volunteering or community-minded event that gives back, and youth-led mentorship opportunities (e.g., sharing and transferring knowledge, skills, and different experiences from youth to youth in order to learn from each other) in a community.

Community is an important part of youth engagement, recognizing that youths do not live in silos. A community can be created among a supportive and reliable network of people who have the interest of youth in mind and who consistently provide the youth with the necessary support and resources. Being a part of community allows youth to feel a sense of solidarity and belonging. Our youth leaders have noted the importance of working with the community for the community using a bottom-up/community-up approach (that can be combined with a top-down approach) to identify and meet the needs of the community.

A community can be formed by relationships with the members of a program (e.g., an agency program for youths addicted to alcohol or drugs). By doing that, they are creating a community of individuals who deal with similar issues/challenges (e.g., an agency program that specifically targets youths with learning disability). Once youths engage in a program together, they come to identify themselves as being part of that group/community. Another example introduced by our youth leaders include “chosen family” in a community context—this is youth’s support system—more flexible and inclusive than just one’s biological family (can be friends, cousins, mentors, social workers, etc.).

In addition, the idea of “intersecting communities” has been introduced by our youth leaders. Briefly, this means different communities coming together through being connected and integrated with each other. Intersecting communities is to bring unity among communities, give youth from different communities an opportunity to work together, and find a relating point or come together with one common purpose through a collaborative project or event. In fact, these communities may overlap—for example, youth may be in a student community and at the same time in an ethnic community. An individual is not one or another but all of the communities make the person who she/he is. At the same time, it is important to give youth the choice of being part of a particular community or multiple communities.

Meaningful youth engagement at community as well as personal and family levels is a key concept for PYD (Davidson et al., 2010; Ramey et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007) through mobilizing youth into positive changes at community (e.g., practice and policy) in addition to at personal and family levels (Fogel, 2004; Jones, 2011; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Surko et al., 2005; Wexler et al., 2009). On the other hand, SJYD involves developing awareness of oppressive forces in youth’s community, including

racist policies and procedures (i.e., Awareness of Community). For example, this can be done through youth leadership and decision making within community organizations to develop youth's critical thinking and leadership skills and sense that they can help change/improve community conditions (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011).

## What: Outcomes/Goals

### RELATIONSHIPS

Typically, a relationship is built through effective communications and positive interactions between two or more people (e.g., youth to youth, youth to mentor, youth to parent), in which they feel a sense of connection, bond, and trust based on meaningful experiences. Importantly, a relationship is to be co-created and co-operated with one another in a nonjudgmental way. On the other hand, having a relationship with self should be considered, for example, individuals working on themselves, such as self-reflection, goal setting, and personal growth.

A relationship often involves knowing that one can feel comfortable with and can rely on another person. Thus, building trust and feeling comfortable and respected (i.e., mutual understanding and respect) are key elements of relationships. Creating a healthy, meaningful relationship with youth means that youth can feel comfortable and open enough to express their feelings and situations with a friend, mentor, or leader. If youths know that they have someone to turn to (even just to debrief) during times of stress, this can prevent relapsing into negative life habits, getting down on themselves, or turning to ineffective methods of coping. A positive relationship involves helping a person better her/himself to become the person she/he aspires to be. In contrast, negative relationships are those that hinder persons from fully realizing and reaching their potentials.

Importantly, PYD involves mutually respectful and nonjudgmental *relationship-building* to promote a sense of trust and connectedness (Fogel, 2004; Jones, 2011; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Surko et al., 2005; Wexler et al., 2009). In particular, relationship-building has been identified as a key overarching practice for working with youth who often have trust issues and may have experienced difficulties in relationships (e.g., neglect, abusive relationship, lack of intimate and secure relationship) (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009). Relationship-building through youths and community engagement also help bridge the "disconnect" between youths and the communities in which they live (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). Within SJYD, showing empathy for people who suffer from oppression builds a sense of compassion and connection/relationship that aspires to bettering the world

for all (i.e., Awareness of Others). This can lead to youth identifying strategies for social justice practice and social change through collective action to counter oppression. This can also promote a sense of belonging and humanity and connection to a wider community, and reduce a feeling of isolation (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011).

## Stability

Our youth leaders have defined stability as being able to hold something reliable, steady, stable, intact, firm, and/or strong so that people can rely on it. Stability involves establishing a sense of consistency and reliability with a room for positive change and flexibility where changes can be made to better accommodate the needs of youth. Stability can also be seen as a foundation that keeps a structure from collapsing. It is important that stability is guaranteed to keep a trustworthy relationship and to make progress consistent so that it does not turn stagnant.

Stability is an essential aspect in youth engagement. When youths partake in youth engagement, they learn the basic life skills to stand on their own and create their life foundation so that they can lead a stable life in a sustainable way. For example, if there is a helpful counseling program for youth with stable staff, youth can rely on the services of the counselors when they come in for help. Stability means that youth can feel confident and reassured that this service, resource, or person can provide continuous and constant support. This can mean knowing that there is always a bed to sleep in or always someone to talk to regardless of circumstances. The notion of “paying back model” was introduced by our youth leaders, meaning that youth can go back to a youth centre, for example, and can rely on and trust the people there and have a sustainable/stable relationship.

Building a stable, trustworthy relationship and connection to others and broader community is a key factor in PYD (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Fogel, 2004; Jones, 2011; Laursen & Birmingham, 2003; Surko et al., 2005; Wexler et al., 2009). In addition, SJYD emphasizes not only youth’s self-awareness of how race, gender, class, and other dimensions of power influence their lives, but also the engagement in actions to address these oppressive power-based conditions in an ongoing, sustainable/stable way (Arches, 2012; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ross, 2011).

## Achievements

An achievement means to accomplish a goal and/or overcome a challenge that requires hard work and perseverance, along with courage, effort, and

ability. Achievements can relate differently to individuals in terms of what their goals are, and what each achievement means to them—these can be tangible or abstract. An achievement can be big or small, accomplished through a progression of an individual's journey to attaining her/his goals. To be able to achieve something meaningful, youth need support and focus. An achievement helps establish a sense of pride and self-confidence in youth.

PYD emphasizes the strengths, resources, and potentials of youth to promote a variety of developmental competencies that can be used to engage in productive activities and enhance a sense of achievement (Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008). Also, the SJYD is theorized to involve the three levels of self, community, and global awareness that operate to expand youth consciousness to higher levels of social criticality and human compassion through social justice in youth development. Once young people feel they can be a contributive member of society, they become more confident about cultivating positive changes in their own lives with a sense of achievement (Camarota, 2011; Ginwright & Camarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011).

Depending on one's age and stage of life, an individual may set different goals (big and small) and want to accomplish these within a reasonable time frame. Examples include: graduating from a high school with good grades to be admitted into a university; experimenting with and exceling one's artistic abilities in such forms as writing, painting, and acting; and a youth who has never had an opportunity to receive a formal education is given such a chance to learn and may graduate with honours.

Celebration of youths' achievements can provide positive feedback and encourage them to continue on their efforts for positive change. Acknowledgments can also bring youth up to feel confident that they can accomplish something meaningful/positive. Small achievements such as finishing a small-scale project can be recognized with, for example, "a good day coffee date," "a day sober card," or simply a kind, verbal acknowledgement. Big achievements such as graduating from a high school, receiving a scholarship, getting a job, or getting a place to live can be acknowledged with a celebration, ceremony, party, and/or reward, such as going bowling, watching a movie, or giving a gift card to a book store. It is important for youth to know that every little step can eventually build up to a milestone and the celebration of each little achievement/milestone can promote youth's motivation for and commitment to his/her journey of life, which is unique to each person. Efforts to accomplish one's goals may not always result in favorable outcomes, but giving full efforts to do so provides important life lessons that can eventually benefit the person by learning from these lessons.

## How: Actions/Processes

### COMMUNICATION

Communication is a form of expressing oneself or exchanging information in such a way that is understood by another person, including verbal speaking, body language, expression (e.g., facial, through art), technological (e.g., email, internet, blog, Facebook), and written forms. Communication may involve expressing one's thoughts, feelings, experiences, goals, values/beliefs, dreams/desires, hardships, losses, etc. Even silence can be a form of communication.

Communication is a means of connection. Face-to-face communication is an effective method of communication. However, it is important to be open to different, multiple forms of communications, by providing various options for communication (e.g., social media), considering a context and relationship. Besides better understanding of others, communication can facilitate personal discovery to oneself through communicating with self. An example of communication is when youths express their feelings through art and share these with someone.

Communication can be a form of therapy (either personal or group therapy), by getting things (e.g., hardships, frustrations) off of one's chest by sharing and talking about these in a constructive way, through being alert to both verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., body language, the lack of words to express oneself). Occasions at a group therapy can promote a sense of belonging by sharing experiences and building relationships with realization that others may have been through same or similar experiences—"a problem shared is a problem halved." These occasions can also improve youth's communication skills to be comfortable and build confidence. Personal therapy can be seen as a safe space where youths are given an opportunity to relax and talk about their anger, sadness, confusion, and so on. By speaking and hearing about these (through communication), at the end youth may feel relieved because they can know that they are not alone and that there may be someone else that is going through hard times just like them. Another key factor for effective communication is that the use of a respectful, nonjudgemental communication with youth is essential to build a positive, meaningful relationship with youth.

The importance of effective communication in youth engagement has been shown including youth civic engagement, for example, through online youth civic forums (Freelon, 2011) and the role of communication in youth citizenship (Ward, 2008). Also emphasized include the role of communication and education in promoting youth competence for socialization into public life (McLeod, Shah, Hess, & Lee, 2010) and the use of powerful language and youth leadership to facilitate youth civic engagement in a community setting (Cassell et al., 2006). Furthermore, Arches (2012) highlighted the importance of building communication skills in SJYD.

## ACTIVITIES

Activities are what we partake in every day of our lives—these keep our brain thinking and our body moving. Activities can be seen as a means of keeping one's time occupied in a productive, meaningful way—being active whether mentally, physically, socially, or spiritually. For example, activities can involve exercising, art, socializing, reading, going to school or work, or activities that foster group work such as a music band or other engaging extra-curricular activity—anything that encourages youth to use their skills and better themselves in a productive/constructive way. Activities are meant to engage those who participate.

Activities have unique, beneficial properties such as physical exercise, mental health promotion, relationship building, and many more. Being unique means that activities are meaningful and not just repetitive—these can challenge and engage youth. Being beneficial means engaging in activities that provide lessons/learnings and deeper meanings such as morals or skills learned. For example, youths may participate in a youth program or a leadership program where they have opportunities to engage in or lead various activities, such as going hiking together and attending or facilitating a sport day. Another meaningful activity can be the one where youths partake in a challenging activity to learn and use new skills, and take an initiative to apply the skills learned from their experiences (e.g., summer camps) to other settings.

Youth development activity/program participation (e.g., out-of-school time activities) was found as a key factor for PYD (Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, and Zarrett, 2009) through promoting youth mentorship and youth–adult collaboration, and learning important life skills (Benson et al., 2006; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Youth development programs include activities that provide a nurturing, safe space for youth to explore and experience their worlds and to learn skills related to education, social competence, and civic engagement (e.g., see Eccles & Gootman, 2002). “These activities are thus training grounds for community engagement” (Zaff et al., 2011, p. 1209). In addition, Zaff et al. (2011) showed that such youth development activity/program participation is a key contextual factor that predicts the course of civic youth engagement trajectories during adolescence. Furthermore, a critical analysis of race, gender, culture; and social, economic, and political dynamics is inherent to programs and activities that operate within a SJYD framework, as is addressing the root causes of community problems (Suleiman et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2006). SJYD programs/activities aim to enhance youth's critical thinking ability, a sense of belonging to a community (thus reducing a sense of isolation), and their awareness and understanding of political processes and power dynamics (Ross, 2011).

Speaking of implementing activities, our youth leaders have mentioned having a list of meaningful and healthy activities in “fun” ways to bring

youth up. *Bringing youth up* means to have them respect themselves and respect others and things around them. Bringing youth up involves enabling youth to gain confidence, work together, and move forward. Bringing youth up also involves providing them with a strong platform where they come together, speak about issues, and help youth stand stronger. This is all about “uplifting” youth! This notion is in line with “lifting youth up,” as noted earlier when the concept of empowerment was described.

## FRAMEWORK IMPLEMENTATION: DISCUSSION NOTES FOR PRACTITIONERS

To prepare for implementing the framework, a session plan that includes outlines of activities and/or workshops over a series of sessions can be developed, along with a session agenda. To be outlined in the agenda, each session may start with a *check in* to get participants settled/oriented by sharing how each participant is doing, followed by icebreaker activities (to be acquainted, open up, and get everyone to be comfortable) and then main activities/workshops, ending with a *check-out* to reflect on each session. Conceptually, this session plan can be in line with the framework that contains the key themes/facilitators to effective and meaningful youth engagement. This way can allow the use of specific activities/workshops to purposefully promote particular components of the framework. A certain session may be targeted to facilitate only one or two themes, whereas another session may be more broadly be structured to promote more than two or all of the themes, depending on the needs and wants of session participants and facilitators.

Another basis upon which activity options are selected can be the skills/talents, qualifications, and prior experiences of youth leaders who facilitate these sessions. For example, discussion with our youth leaders in our team has revealed that these youth leaders possess skills/talents and qualifications with prior experiences that help implement various engagement activities. Specifically, our youth leaders are skilled/capable to facilitate a variety of engagement activities/workshops such as art, theatre, poetry, and music (e.g., rap and spoken-word workshop). For instance, from a strengths-based perspective, “I am powerful” is a workshop that facilitates participants to identify what makes the person powerful by enabling to better understand oneself, one’s strengths, and one’s community. This “I am powerful” workshop focuses on promoting several components of our framework, including empowerment, opportunity, learning, and community. Other examples include: a workshop on “developing your life’s vision” (offer the opportunity to create a personally crafted vision of life); “finding your passion” workshop (through engaging in different activities to identify youth’s passion and

embrace authentic self); and a workshop on “body mapping” (identifying youth’s relationship with their bodies) that can be combined with theatre. These examples are designed to facilitate such components of our framework as opportunity, learning, and relationships.

Our youth leaders have also suggested that art-based workshops can involve creating self-identity portraits to build up to a “talent show” (as described earlier for the theme of empowerment) akin to “open mike” (a live show where audiences may perform at the microphone or on a stage) to showcase youth’s talents and build youth’s confidence, as well as creative painting leading to a mural art exhibit at a local community gallery or youth centre. Again, these art-based workshops can promote empowerment, opportunity, learning, community, relationships, and achievements, which represent various components of the framework. In addition, dialogues with our youth leaders have generated a wide variety of other potential activities: (a) role playing with different life scenarios (to develop communication, leadership, and life skills), (b) positive affirmations through which youth share stories and complements with each other, (c) making a script about how youth want to see things changed in the community (can also be “improv,” improvisation—acting on the spot with no script; you create as you go along, as described earlier), (d) field trips such as visiting local universities/colleges and community youth agencies, (e) going for spiritual nature walk to promote a sense of letting go and spiritual renewal/rejuvenation, (f) hosting an employment/career educational youth conference to help open youth’s eyes to positive experiences and educational and career options, and (g) Youth Summit/Youth Forum to feature motivational speakers relevant to youth’s life circumstances and have youth-led sessions to identify youth issues and prepare action strategies. Once again, these activities/workshops can be designed to promote relevant components/dimensions of the framework of youth engagement.

Our youth leaders have noted that accommodating youth’s interests and encouraging youth to try new, positive/constructive activities are important; thus, an activity guide/action plan can be flexible to allow choices by youth participants from a list of constructive activities. Brainstorming or discussion among youth leaders/facilitators can take place to collectively identify and agree on a list of activities with its description and required resources within their activity guide/action plan. Furthermore, inviting representatives from youth participants to a planning meeting should be considered to ensure the relevance of sessions to specific participants. Finally, representatives from partner agencies who have expertise in youth engagement can provide training and mentoring for youth leaders/facilitators (e.g., safety, anti-oppression, conflict resolution, anger management, harm reduction, mental health).

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Engaging youth with challenging life conditions presents a significance challenge in our society, considering the prevalence of disconnect and distrust they often experience with their system in which they live. Yet, meaningful youth engagement is a key concept not only for positive youth development (PYD), but also for a systems change to more effectively support high-risk youth and families (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Yohalem & Martin, 2007; Wexler et al., 2009). In addition, its contribution to social justice youth development (SJYD) is critical as youth promotes awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity to engage in social justice activities that counter oppressive conditions (Camarota, 2011; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011). Importantly, youth should be respectfully acknowledged as a key contributor to PYD, SJYD, and a systems change (e.g., Durlak et al., 2007; Ginwright, Camarota, & Noguera, 2005). This article presented a framework of youth engagement being developed through working with youth leaders in our community-based research team, by using a PAR process. Although the notion presented in the framework has directly used our youth leaders' lived experiences, talents, and voices, both PYD and SJYD provide a theoretical contextualization for our research. However, contrary to a conventional approach to basing primarily on an academic perspective, youths were the ones who were in charge of the development of the framework, with appropriate support by academic facilitators, including the identification of the key themes/dimensions and its definitions and practical examples presented here. Our research team has a full faith on and credit to outstanding work by our talented youth leaders throughout the entire process of developing the framework. This framework is a true result/milestone of ongoing hard work by the youth leaders between October 2012 and June 2013 through a series of semi-monthly three-hour meetings, as pointed out earlier. Our team will report the findings of our framework testing study, which is currently under way, in our future article.

We would like to conclude by stressing that we should not underestimate the talents and resources of youths in our communities. Conducting a youth-guided/youth-led research project is not an easy process but will generate very meaningful and useful outcomes through being facilitated by youth leadership and engagement in working with community and university partners. The role of youth leadership and engagement is essential in this process where building a positive, trustful relationship with youth in a mutually respectful and nonjudgmental way is required. Outcomes from the use of this youth-oriented approach have the potential to significantly advance the ways in which youths with challenging conditions are supported through policy and practice in a more youth-friendly manner.

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