



VYPER Evaluation Report:
Youth Engagement through
Youth-Adult Partnerships



McCreary
Centre Society

Youth Health • Youth Research • Youth Engagement

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INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

Valley Youth Partnership for Engagement and Respect (VYPER) was a 2 ½ year project (March, 2014 to September, 2016) funded by Health Canada's Drug Strategy Community Initiatives Fund (DSCIF). Its aim was to build sustainable collaborations among youth and adult allies across the Fraser Health region to prevent youth substance use and to promote health. An overarching objective of VYPER was to facilitate a community shift from the implementation of adult-led initiatives to youth-adult partnerships which engage youth in meaningful ways.

The target population was at-risk and isolated youth aged 12-24. The goal was to include youth living in rural and remote communities, Aboriginal youth, those who identified as LGBTQ2S, New Canadians, youth with mental health and associated challenges, and those who were disengaged from school and community activities.

VYPER asked McCreary Centre Society to carry out an independent evaluation, from March, 2015 to November, 2016, with a specific focus on youth participants' meaningful engagement in VYPER activities and programs. The evaluation assessed the extent to which youth were meaningfully and actively involved in the development and implementation of VYPER activities and programs. The evaluation also measured outcomes of youth's meaningful engagement, as well as process and progress toward expected outcomes.

In addition, VYPER requested that McCreary conduct a literature review on youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships. The literature review, included in this report, is comprised of an overview of youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships; a description of associated benefits and challenges; examples in action; an environmental scan of youth engagement policies in BC; and promising practices.

DATA PROVIDED BY VYPER

The following numbers reflect the period between March, 2014 and September, 2016:

- A total of 1590 VYPER-related activities and events took place in Hope (192), Chilliwack/Agassiz-Harrison (314), Abbotsford/Mission (259), Fraser North (267), Fraser South (194), and regionally/provincially/nationally (364).
- VYPER activities and events were attended by 14,030 youth and adults, including 3513 youth, 4164 managers, 5268 staff, and 1085 other adults. The number of individuals experiencing secondary benefits continues to grow as new projects and events emerge from the youth-adult partnerships that were developed through VYPER.
- The activities and events included 360 Youth-Adult Partnership meetings, 324 youth gatherings, and 906 adult meetings.
- Overall, youth outnumbered adults at 35% of the meetings and events.
- A total of 143 organizations and committees received grants, engaged with VYPER youth on projects, and/or contributed substantially to moving forward VYPER's youth-developed mission and vision. Project partners provided a total of \$1,064,450 of in-kind contributions, including \$41,950 in office space.
- VYPER grant applications and grant guides were developed and available to download from the website. These were designed as interventions in themselves to support organizations to consider working from an Outcome Mapping framework and to engage in youth-adult partnership program evaluation capacity building activities. In total, the grant guide was downloaded over 350 times; the mini grant application 740 times; and the Youth-Adult Partnership grant application 879 times.
- VYPER released a report in October 2015, "Making Resilience Happen through Youth-Adult Partnership," which was updated in October 2016. The report was announced through email and was available for download on VYPER's website, where the executive summary was downloaded over 470 times and the full report over 4014 times. Audio versions of the executive summary and full document were also available, and these were downloaded 105 times.
- A companion "Making Resilience Happen thru Youth-Adult Partnership" flipbook and set of 5 animated videos were produced, based on the four core principles outlined in the document "Making Resilience Happen through Youth-Adult Partnership." A total of 500 physical copies of the flipbook were printed for on-going knowledge exchange activities related to the project. The introductory video related to this project was released in early November 2016, and within a couple days was viewed over 200 times. It is VYPER's hope that the videos and flipbooks will provide a tool for discussion that can be used with youth and adults who are aiming to work together.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses on evidence that evaluates youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships. Benefits of participation to youth, adults, and the broader community are identified, as well as associated challenges. Examples in action are presented, as well as youth engagement policies in BC, and promising practices in the area of youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships.

This literature review included searches from academic databases (e.g., EBSCO, PubMed, the American Evaluation Association database of peer reviewed publications) as well as grey literature (e.g., National Collaborating Centre for Methods and Tools; government publications; reports from community organizations).

Overview of Youth Engagement

Youth engagement has been described as when youth are meaningfully and sustainably involved in decision-making that affects them (Checkoway, 2011; Smith, Peled, Hoogeveen, Cotman, & McCreary Centre Society, 2009). There are many ways in which youth might be meaningfully engaged in their communities, such as through volunteering; planning and delivering community projects; serving on municipal boards and student council; and making policy recommendations (Checkoway, 2011; Blanchet-Cohen, Mack, & Cook, 2010; MCFD, 2013c).

Meaningful youth engagement allows youth to take action, have their voice heard, and to actively participate in their own development by influencing young people's health in a variety of areas (i.e., social, environmental, economic, physical, and cultural domains; BC Healthy Communities, 2011). Organizations and the wider community can also benefit from youth engagement. Organizations can develop a better understanding of youth issues, become more responsive to the needs of the youth they serve, and gain a more focused vision (Ramey, 2013). In communities where youth are meaningfully engaged, youth and adults have enjoyed closer intergenerational relationships and have developed initiatives that have benefited the entire community (Heness, Ball, & Moncheski, 2013; Paterson & Panessa, 2008; Wexler, 2011).

There are other reasons to incorporate youth voice in a variety of initiatives. For example, according to Hart (1992), youth's participation in civil society is imperative for them to develop competencies and find meaningful roles within that society. Youth's participation in social and political processes and decision-making is seen as essential to a democratic society and to young people's realization of their rights (Checkoway, 2011; Hinton, Tisdall, Gallagher, & Elsley, 2008).

Models of youth engagement

There are a number of models of youth engagement, such as Hart's (1992) "Ladder of Participation." According to this model, the lower rungs of the ladder (i.e., manipulation, decoration, and tokenism) reflect youth participation that is not genuine. At these lower rungs, youth are not informed or consulted in decision-making processes, and rather are involved in

order for adults to achieve their own goals. The higher rungs of the ladder are models of genuine participation, where youth are “assigned but informed”; consulted in a meaningful way (rather than decorative); or are able to share decision-making with adults.

Hart noted, however, that the highest rungs of the ladder (e.g., “child-initiated and directed” or “child-initiated, shared decisions with adults”) should not be considered as the ideal in all situations. Different youth might prefer varying degrees of participation and responsibility, depending on their circumstances, abilities, and interests. For Hart, choice was important when considering genuine youth participation, and specifically for youth to have opportunities to choose to participate to their maximum abilities. Similar conclusions were made about the Youth Engagement Spectrum, developed by HeartWood Centre, which posits that youth engagement opportunities exist along a spectrum, with one end not considered better than the other, but that each should be explored to find the best fit (MCFD, 2013c).

Lundy’s Model of Participation (as cited in DCYA, 2015) was created to conceptualize Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The model acknowledges that children and youth have the right to express their views and for these views to be given “due weight.” The model is divided into four parts, including space (which stipulates that young people must be given safe and inclusive opportunities to express themselves); voice (they are encouraged to express their view); audience (that their view is listened to); and influence (that their view may be acted upon appropriately; DCYA, 2015). According to the authors, it is this type of non-hierarchical model of youth engagement which was seen as most effective and therefore incorporated by the government of Ireland in its policies on children and youth participation (DCYA, 2015).

The Typology of Youth Participation and Empowerment (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010) is another model that identifies five forms of youth engagement. It sees shared control (‘pluralistic’ engagement) as the top of a pyramid. This model encourages adults to share responsibility with youth, co-learn together and to serve as a resource and collaborator, rather than adults acting as the experts or allowing youth to have total control.

Youth-adult partnerships

Youth-adult partnerships are an essential element of youth engagement and have been described as shared decision-making between youth and adults for community action (Zeldin et al., 2005). These partnerships have been characterized as including multiple youth and multiple adults working together in a democratic way over a sustained period of time (Zeldin et al., 2013). In this way, youth-adult partnerships may contribute to the success of projects that impact the wider community. These partnerships can also be a way to address the isolation of youth and an opportunity for adults to contribute their passion for community participation (Zeldin et al., 2013). Others see youth-adult partnerships as a promising solution specifically for marginalized youth for building skills and helping to shape their programs and communities (Libby, Rosen, & Sedonaen, 2005).

Benefits

A variety of benefits of youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships have been identified. These include an increase in youth's sense of community connectedness, and enhanced social networks (Hart, 1992; Smith et al., 2009; Zeldin et al., 2005).

Meaningful participation has also been found to directly impact young people's mental health and well-being (Bulanda & McCrea, 2013; Oliver, Collin, Burns, & Nicholas, 2006), in part by feeling valued and empowered by their participation in a project (Howe et al., 2011). Mental health outcomes have included increased self-confidence and perceived competence (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2015; Zeldin et al., 2011). Thomason & Kuperminc (2014) found that youth-adult partnerships can increase access to social capital which in turn can improve girls' self-concept and sense of social acceptance by peers, and can reduce their risk behaviours. Other studies have found a link between meaningful youth engagement and lower rates of substance use, as well as lower rates of risky sexual behaviour and violence among males and females (BC Healthy Communities, 2011; Paglia & Room, 1998).

Gaining a variety of skills and knowledge is also a benefit of youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2015; Zeldin et al., 2011). These might include skills in public speaking, leadership, teamwork, time management, planning and facilitating workshops, and creating written documents. Other benefits might include increased awareness and knowledge of community issues (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2015).

In addition, when youth have been meaningfully involved in organizational decision making, such as through collaboration with adults in setting policy directions for the organization, adults can develop greater confidence in working with youth, as well as a better understanding of and commitment to youth's needs within their organization. Consequently, organizations that involve youth in decision making become more responsive to youth needs, gain a more focused vision of their work, and are more appealing to funders (Zeldin et al., 2000, as cited in Ramey, 2013).

Meaningful youth participation can also have an overall positive impact on organizations' reputations and can increase networking opportunities among agencies (Ramey, 2013). The greater community also benefits from youth-adult partnerships, through gaining active citizens who are versed in addressing challenges through collaboration, improved intergenerational understanding, breakdown of stereotypes, and increased social capital (Latendresse, 2010; MCFD, 2013c).

Meaningful youth engagement within a school context is also important to the well-being of students (Goodnough, 2014). Feeling meaningfully engaged in school activities has been associated with better mental health, a greater sense of safety at school, reduced substance use, improved grades, higher graduation rates, and a greater likelihood of attending post-secondary education (Guèvremont, Findlay, & Kohen, 2014; Smith et al., 2014; Wang & Fredricks, 2013). Partnerships between schools and communities that create more time and opportunities for learning and that promote youth engagement also benefit students by decreasing school dropout rates and improving student outcomes (Bathgate & Silva, 2010).

Challenges and Barriers

Over two decades ago, Hart (1992) stated that there were many domains in which adults undervalued youth's voice, expertise, and ability to participate. Ten years later, youth were still seen as having limited involvement in decision-making and planning processes (Gurstein, Lovato, & Ross, 2003). Currently, it is still rare for youth and adults to partner on important issues that affect young people, despite the potentially positive benefits of youth-adult partnerships (Zeldin et al., 2011).

It may be that many organizations are fearful of change and are unsure of how to implement such partnerships. For example, one challenge that came out of a granting initiative which aimed to increase youth participation in the community was that organizations either focused on youth engagement or on community change, while struggling to merge the two principles together (Campbell et al., 2009).

In addition, authentic youth-adult partnerships take time, especially when reaching out to more vulnerable groups of youth (Campbell et al., 2009). Also, building capacities of a diverse group of adults and youth to work in partnership requires not only time but also staff support and commitment to the goals of the process. In addition, age differences among the youth, as well as differing life experiences and cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, can present challenges in the form of youth having divergent interests and understandings of the systems and structures around them (Campbell et al., 2009).

An inventory of youth-focused organizations in the Lower Mainland, BC, in 2003 showed that barriers to meaningful youth participation included lack of stable funding or financial resources (which leads to more time spent on grant writing than program goals); political and bureaucratic obstacles (which was compounded for youth organizations as they were perceived as inexperienced or lacking legitimacy); and the issue of tokenism (e.g., when youth participation was supported only superficially; Fleming, 2013; Gurstein et al., 2003). Similarly, while youth-serving organizations offered a variety of youth programs, many were hesitant to involve youth in their governance and management. When young people did challenge authority in the community, youth-serving organizations were unwilling to assist them, in order to protect the reputation of the organization with community leaders (Crawley, 2010).

Indeed, tokenism or lack of genuine youth participation is one possible negative effect of the recent popularity of youth engagement (Fleming, 2013). Instead of giving youth a voice, organizations might curtail youth participation in a way that is primarily concerned with protecting an organization's professional identity. Youth can easily detect such tokenism, when they feel their ideas and contributions are not being used, or the changes they hoped for are not taking place (Fleming, 2013).

Another barrier might be the gap between the culture of youth engagement among youth and adult allies and the attitudes and culture within the larger organization or within partner agencies (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor; 2015).

An additional barrier is lack of interest in engagement by the majority of youth, while a small group of youth remains very actively involved in the public sphere (Checkoway, 2011; Gurstein et al., 2003;). One possible reason is that many youth feel they cannot effect change or do not know how to proceed with the ideas they have (Checkoway, 2011; Fleming, 2013). Youth may have also internalized the “adultism” attitudes that prevail in society, which suggest that young people are deficient in some way, or lack the needed skills or knowledge to contribute to their community (Checkoway, 2011). In addition, there may be a limited number of community roles that youth see as available to them, which is something organizations and governments can strive to create in order to add positive roles for youth and to implement youth-adult partnerships (Zeldin et al., 2005). As well, sometimes community organizations rely on a limited number of “trusted” youth (especially in projects with perceived high stakes or public value), which may place unfair burden on some youth and deny others the opportunity to be involved (Campbell et al., 2009).

The costs of youth involvement—in terms of staff workload, time, and resources—are important to acknowledge and anticipate. For example, the challenges of youth-driven granting include the significant time, energy, staff and financial commitments that are likely needed from an organization (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2010). Anticipating these challenges and devoting appropriate resources to youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships can increase their likelihood of success (Ramey, 2013).

Promoting Successful Youth Engagement

To strengthen the practice of youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships, Zeldin and colleagues (2013) articulated four core elements that effective youth-adult partnerships incorporate:

- (1) Authentic decision making.** This takes place when youth are at the center of the decision-making process, and when their voice is heard and taken seriously in all matters that affect them.
- (2) Natural mentors.** These are adults whom youth naturally gravitate toward or choose as a source of support and guidance. These tend to be adults who offer youth personal attention and support, set high but realistic expectations, and who are non-judgmental, passionate, and well organized.
- (3) Reciprocity.** Mutual co-learning, or reciprocal activity, enhances youth development and empowerment, particularly when the community validates the lived experience of the youth.
- (4) Community connectedness.** This is a result of the increased social capital that adults and youth build together.

For youth-adult partnerships to be successful, organizations need to answer why it is important to work together to achieve common aims. They need to create a shared framework or set of values that states the purpose of the partnership with youth. Other strategies include making sure the project is relevant to both adults and youth, supporting youth who will be working with officials (through clear job descriptions, orientation, etc.), and allowing adult leaders to increase their capacity to work with youth (Zeldin et al., 2011).

Three key steps have been identified to set the stage for youth engagement in a project: Assessing organizational readiness; making a plan (which includes mapping, establishing a working group, as well as a vision and plan of action); and establishing a management structure which embodies the key principles of the project (Blanchet-Cohen, et al., 2010).

There is evidence that **youth participation in the broader community**, such as through service-learning or community-based learning, can enhance youth-adult partnerships (Hennessey et al., 2013; Malaville, Berg, & Blank, 2006). Hennessey et al. (2013) described how a youth-led forum allowed adults to see how youth worked together for the betterment of the entire community. The result was that many adults who participated in the forum were surprised that it was organized by youth and afterward described the young people as responsible and confident. In addition, youth-adult community development approaches benefit from participation in projects with “high public value.” One example is a beautification project that is visible to the whole community. Youth’s clear involvement in projects like this cement the idea that they are capable members of the community, raise the stakes for youth-adult partnerships, and allow for greater bonding between youth and adults who work on the project (Hennessey et al., 2013).

It is important to clearly **identify roles and responsibilities of adults and youth** (Campbell et al., 2009; Hennessey et al., 2013; Latendresse, 2010; Zeldin et al., 2011), and be aware of possible dynamics that can take place (Zeldin, Bestul, & Powers, 2012), such as adults’ inexperience of working in partnership with youth, their concerns about relinquishing power to youth, possible skepticism about youth’s abilities, or the tendency to sometimes give all control and accountability to the youth, which is not in line with the partnership model (Zeldin et al., 2012).

It can be beneficial to foster **sustained work and interest in an issue over time**. Most opportunities engage youth in a one-off event or short-term project, which can reduce the opportunity to create lasting relationships between adults and youth. This is something that longer-term projects are much better at facilitating (Hennessey et al., 2013).

Formal and informal **recognition of young people’s contributions** to the community is important. Informal recognition could include adults adopting more positive attitudes about young people over time, which is reflected in the adults’ statements and actions about youth and could include changed media perceptions. Formal recognition of youth’s efforts is also valuable, and can take place through awards or scholarships, extending opportunities to travel or attend conferences, as well as involving youth in public decision making (Hennessey et al., 2013; Sullivan et al., 2010).

Youth engagement should be seen as a practice rather than a specific program (MCFD, 2013c), and is a way of engaging youth in issues they feel passionate about (Cawley, 2010). Further, the most successful initiatives tend to have a clear focus (e.g., poverty reduction, affordable housing, employment) and to have deep ties to the community (Cawley, 2010). Once youth begin **working on concrete activities they care about**, it is easier to mobilize and work together. This shared focus and practical mechanisms for getting things done (such as through consistent tools, training, and planning measures) is an important part of success (Cawley, 2010).

Similarly, Gurstein and colleagues (2003) observed that the most successful initiatives were conducted at the community level and involved youth in meaningful planning, decision-making opportunities, and implementation processes alongside adults. The measures that facilitated youth participation in organizations included **youth having an equal voice within an adult structure and being involved in all aspects from planning to implementation**. Initiatives that included co-facilitation, co-leadership and co-mentorship were best at creating a sense of equality. They encouraged a higher degree of youth participation and allowed shared responsibility and peer support (Gurstein et al., 2003). Also, as organizations change over time, there should be room for a collective dialogue (between adults and youth) around setting new directions and strategies, and problem-solving (Zeldin et al., 2011).

A **strengths-based approach** is an important element of youth-adult partnerships, where each participant is encouraged to work in an area that draws on their strengths and skills (Sullivan et al., 2010). In addition, **giving youth flexibility and the opportunity to be creative** within the delivery and design of programs or workshops increases their sense of ownership and enjoyment of those projects (Latendresse, 2010).

Creating safe spaces for youth is important for fostering meaningful youth participation. Giving youth the opportunity to create and define their own spaces (including unstructured ones) can support their meaningful engagement and can ultimately shape communities to be more inclusive (Blanchet-Cohen, et al., 2010).

Specific strategies which have supported successful youth-adult partnerships include providing youth with access to the Internet and food; transportation to get to meetings; attendance incentives; and opportunities to travel to conferences and workshops (Sullivan et al, 2010, Campbell et al., 2009).

Examples in Action

Several evaluations have been carried out on youth engagement initiatives and youth-adult partnerships. For example, one youth-led evaluation in the United Kingdom (Fleming, 2013) entailed youth researchers engaging with other young people to gauge their experiences with youth engagement. Through small group interviews and interactive workshops, the youth researchers spoke with 175 young people with diverse experiences and backgrounds. The researchers learned that youth participants had been involved in decision-making in a variety of roles and took part in forums and groups, including with elected authorities, trustees and board members, national and community-based groups, advisories, and councils. Through their participation, youth contributed to decision-making in various ways, for instance in strategic planning sessions with organizations, steering committees, and grant-giving groups. The model of “*grant making by youth*” in particular, which was organized through the Youth Opportunities Fund and Youth Bank groups, allowed local adult councillors and elected officials to see young people in a new and positive light. Although initially skeptical of youth’s ability to make responsible decisions, the adults were encouraged by the positive roles they saw youth taking on as part of the granting scheme. This experience led many of the adults to consider other avenues in which young people could be involved in the future (Fleming, 2013).

Another example of youth participating as researchers is *the Intergenerational Dialogue Exchange and Action (IDEA)* process in rural Alaska (Wexler, 2011). The project engaged youth, adults, and Elders to communicate with each other, teach one another, and learn together. Youth participated as co-researchers, interviewees, audience members, and digital storytellers. This type of intergenerational sharing led to increased youth-adult connections as well as to transmission of cultural knowledge. Other outcomes included an enhanced understanding of self for all individuals involved, and an increase in youth's sense of cultural identity (Wexler, 2011), which has been linked to health benefits such as decreased substance use and suicidality.

The Youth Alliance project was an evaluated program in Australia. It engaged youth in decision-making in order to promote the mental health of youth program participants and of those in the wider community (Howe, Batchelor, & Bochynska, 2011). The aim of the project was to ensure that young people were involved in the development of youth mental health services, and employed youth consultants to help achieve this goal. With the support of an adult coordinator, youth took on a variety of tasks including conducting consultations with youth mental health service providers, assisting with a youth mental health community awareness campaign, and redesigning and promoting “ycentral,” a one-stop-shop for youth mental health services (Howe et al, 2011). Results of a mixed-method external evaluation showed that the majority of youth consultants felt they were supported throughout the project and experienced a positive work atmosphere. All felt that being part of the project enhanced their lives. They also reported gaining presentation and communications skills, and practicing teamwork, public speaking, and time management. Other benefits of participating included increased awareness that there were other young people struggling with mental health challenges (particularly among youth consultants who experienced mental health challenges themselves), and youth feeling valued and empowered by their participation in the project. Challenges included retention of Youth Alliance consultants (particularly among those from more disadvantaged environments), finding a balance between adults providing support and allowing the Youth Alliance consultants to have autonomy, and the need for stable funding (Howe et al., 2011).

The New Mentality was a community mental health promotion program in Ontario (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2015). This pilot program had two components: establishing a network of youth and adults interested in mental health issues; and developing specific program activities, projects, and events to reduce stigma around mental health and promoting mental health awareness, with the ultimate goal of improving the child and youth mental health system. The idea was for youth and adults to share control in an intergenerational partnership (in which youth and adults are treated as equal partners, or become equal in the process). However, the program did not fit with this framework because while both adults and youth made important contributions to promoting mental health as part of the program, leadership and roles shifted between youth and adults throughout the process.

Results of the New Mentality program evaluation showed that despite initial struggles to identify clear roles for adults and youth, more clear objectives emerged as the program developed. Defined goals and precise deadlines and milestones were seen as beneficial, but so was a flexible and collaborative framework between adults and youth. Further, relationships between youth and adult staff were vital. Adult allies were seen as an important link between youth and staff and were needed to keep youth engagement on the agenda. Consequently, youth appreciated

that adult support was available and were able to articulate benefits of adult participation, which included adults helping youth fill out paperwork, navigating bureaucratic systems, forging connections for youth in the community, and problem-solving. In addition, supportive relationships between the youth leaders themselves were seen as positive. Sites with more than one youth leader yielded more successful projects than those with only one leader (Ramey & Rose-Krasnor, 2015).

YouthSpace was a national youth engagement initiative by J.W. McConnell Family Foundation (Cawley, 2010). Coalitions of community partners and youth were brought together to address opportunities and challenges. Projects took place in different communities across Canada, and included improving relations between the police and homeless and street-involved youth; young people working with the transit system to design bus passes in Calgary; the development of *Circus School* in Halifax which was a gathering of street-involved youth and adults who practiced circus arts, and allowed participants to build and share their skills and perform throughout the city; and the creation of the Thunder Bay Youth Action Council, which bridged the gap between youth and the local City Council and has influenced the work of the City Council and local agencies such as United Way.

Seven communities in California received grants from the Sierra Health Foundation to support healthy youth development, with youth engagement as a key principle. An interim evaluation demonstrated that the initiative promoted youth engagement and leadership through its activities, strengthened youth development networks in the area, increased settings for youth-adult partnerships, disseminated youth development principles, and increased opportunities for youth (Campbell et al., 2009).

Ireland recently became the first country in Europe to publish a strategy on child participation in decision-making. The strategy recognizes that youth are entitled to have a voice in decisions that affect them in all spheres of life, including community, education, legal, and health and social services (DCYA, 2015). The strategy makes a commitment to continue to involve children and youth in the development of policies, legislation, and research.

Youth Engagement Policies in BC

Governments are increasingly seeing the benefits of involving youth as partners. For example, provincial policies and strategies can engage youth in issues such as education and health, and the Federal government can support youth engagement in areas like First Nations, Inuit, and Métis rights, through mechanisms such as youth secretariats (Blanchet-Cohen et al., 2010).

Ministry of Children and Family Development

In its Operational and Strategic Directional Plan, the BC Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD; 2012) stated that service delivery must be child-centered and recognize youth's rights to participate in decisions that affect their lives according to their age and maturity.

In their toolkit on youth engagement, MCFD (2013a) stated the following:

“Engaging youth contributes to the effectiveness of programs, services and policies. It helps keep organizations enthusiastic, energized and informed. It also supports young people to develop to their full potential and nurtures the next generation of advocates for youth” (p. 3).

MCFD identified youth engagement as a framework for youth and adults to make decisions as equal partners (MCFD, “n.d.” para. 1). In its youth engagement toolkit, MCFD stated that it is time to consider engaging youth as partners at an organizational level, so they can contribute to the development of programs and services (MCFD, 2013a). The Champion’s Guide, a supplement to the toolkit, also focused on creating opportunities for youth to play meaningful roles in the operation, governance, and decision-making structures of organizations (MCFD, 2013b).

Ministry of Education

The BC Ministry of Education (2015) has called for an education system that is flexible and engages students in their own learning, while fostering the skills they would need to thrive in a quickly changing world. It has also discussed the need for youth to be invested in their own learning and engaged in their school community. A series of consultations were underway with youth, as well as with educators, parents, and other stakeholders, around the redesign of graduation requirements and other aspects of the education system.

Fraser Health Authority

Fraser Health Authority recognized that the region is home to 40% of BC’s youth population (those under 18), and that approximately 14% of children and youth aged 13 to 18 experienced mental health issues (Fraser Health Authority, 2014). As a result, the Health Authority was planning a redesign of its Youth Clinics, and to engage youth in the process of determining the strategy behind this initiative (A. Matson, Clinical Nurse Educator, personal communication, July 7, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This literature review identified current evidence available about youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships. Ongoing evaluation and sharing of lessons learned will help to further increase our knowledge of youth-adult partnerships and the factors that can support their success.

VYPER staff incorporated a number of the evidence-based strategies into their youth-adult partnership work. The evaluation of VYPER is presented next.

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The evaluation measured expected outcomes in various domains (listed below), as well as progress toward expected outcomes, using a mixed-methods approach. This approach included both quantitative data (youth self-report survey) and qualitative information (from youth focus groups, interviews with grantees and staff, youth's responses to open-ended survey questions, and internal VYPER documents). More information about the measures is included in the next subsection.

Expected Outcomes

The youth survey and focus groups tapped the following expected outcomes among youth participants because of their involvement with VYPER:

- **Increased participation in community activities**
- **More meaningful engagement in community activities**
- **Increased sense of connection to school and the community**
- **Enhanced support networks**
- **Greater knowledge of available community services; greater openness to accessing needed services (youth health clinics, substance use counsellors, etc.).**
- **Increased skills (leadership, facilitation, critical thinking, collaboration with adults and other youth, grant-writing)**
- **Increased knowledge of youth health promotion**
- **Improved mental health, including greater sense of stability, self-confidence, sense of competence, sense of self-efficacy, and hopefulness**
- **Reduced risk behaviours, including substance use**

Interviews with adults tapped the above outcomes as well as the following expected outcomes among adults:

- **Increased understanding of effective youth engagement strategies**
- **Greater capacity and motivation to engage with youth in future program planning, development, and delivery.**
- **Greater reliance on youth voice in their work, and the sense that their work is not as meaningful without it.**
- **Improved implementation of youth engagement strategies and more youth-adult partnerships.**
- **Development of a knowledge-exchange infrastructure to share promising practices for meaningful youth engagement and youth-adult collaborations, including sharing across communities.**

In addition, the interviews and focus groups assessed the following process issues:

- Whether the youth engagement projects were implemented as planned
- Youth's level of engagement
- To what extent youth had a voice in project decisions
- To what extent adults consulted with youth; adults invited youth to collaborate; or/and youth invited adults to collaborate on the development and delivery of youth health promotion initiatives
- Any changes that were made to the youth-engagement projects (and reasons for changes)
- Any challenges to youth engagement and how these were addressed
- Approaches to youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships that worked well
- Aspects of the partnerships that could be improved
- Any unexpected project outcomes (negative and positive)
- Lessons learned, and what (if anything) could be done differently, in relation to youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships.

Measures & Other Data Sources

Youth survey

McCreary worked collaboratively with VYPER to develop the youth survey. The survey was then piloted with a small group of youth and changes were made based on their feedback. A total of 39 youth completed the survey.

The survey included questions about youth's age; cultural or ethnic backgrounds; gender identities and sexual orientations; where they lived; whether they were born in Canada and how long they have lived in the country; and physical and mental health. The purpose was to assess the extent to which VYPER was targeting the intended group of youth.

The survey also included questions about youth's involvement with VYPER, their level of meaningful engagement, and their experiences with youth-adult collaborations. Items also assessed changes in youth's lives because of their involvement with VYPER (increased community involvement, reduced risk behaviours, etc.).

Youth had most commonly been involved with VYPER for at least a year when they completed the survey (41%), while 33% had been involved for 6 to 11 months, and the remaining 26% had been involved for less than 6 months.

Youth focus groups

Youth participants had the opportunity to take part in focus groups to share more in-depth information and feedback about their experience with VYPER. Six focus groups, facilitated by McCreary staff, took place across the Fraser Health region during VYPER area meetings (Agassiz, Burnaby, Chilliwack, Hope, Mission, Surrey), as well as one during the youth-led VYPERence conference in Chilliwack. A total of 28 youth participated across the seven focus groups.

Youth who took part in focus groups had been involved with VYPER between six months to over two years.

Interviews with adult & youth grantees

Individual phone interviews took place with youth and adult supports who received grants from VYPER to carry out youth-adult partnership projects.

VYPER's mini grants (maximum of \$500) were designed to support the process of bringing together adults and youth to develop the larger Youth Adult Partnership Grant applications. Mini grants generally covered honoraria for youth participation, food, and transportation costs. A total of 26 were awarded. The larger Youth Adult Partnership (YAP) Grant (maximum \$10,000) supported projects that worked toward VYPER's intended outcomes. A total of 22 YAP grants were awarded (see Appendix for descriptions of the awarded YAP grants).

The phone interviews included questions about grantees' experiences working on the youth-adult partnership projects, such as the degree to which youth had a voice and were involved in decision-making; challenges; successes; and lessons learned.

Interviews with VYPER staff

A total of nine staff members took part in exit phone interviews with a McCreary staff member when they moved on from their involvement with VYPER. They had been involved with VYPER between eight months to just under two years. Interviewed staff included area facilitators, regional facilitators/coordinators, youth-adult partnership coordinator, and project managers. A couple of practicum students also took part in interviews.

Staff were asked about experiences of youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships through VYPER; changes they noticed among youth participants; other successes as well as challenges; and any other feedback or suggestions they had for VYPER relating to youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships.

CCBT sessions

The Community Capacity Building Tool (CCBT) is a 37-item measure developed by the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC). The purpose is to measure community capacity and track the results of capacity building during the course of funded projects. VYPER facilitated discussions to collect pre-test (Time 1) data in six communities (Agassiz, Chilliwack, Fraser North, Fraser South, Hope & Boston Bar, and Fraser Central), where a total of 27 individuals took part. McCreary facilitated discussions in these communities to collect post-test (Time 2) data, and 32 individuals took part.

Qualitative information from these sessions was integrated within this report, while the quantitative data was submitted to Health Canada (one survey per community). In addition, quantitative pre- and post- data were entered into an SPSS database and analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, as recommended by PHAC, to measure changes over time.

Other data sources

The following sources of information were also reviewed and integrated into the evaluation report where applicable:

- Staff feedback session, which took place April 9th, 2016 during VYPER's staff retreat. A McCreary staff member was invited to take notes for the evaluation.
- Internal evaluation report on the VYPER Staff Reflection and Feedback Retreat (Grigg, 2016).
- VYPER report, Themes from VYPER Staff Reflections. This report described themes that emerged from staff's two-week summaries and project diaries, where staff reflected on their experiences, including challenges and successes in their work with VYPER.
- Qualitative information from VYPER's community self-report surveys: October, 2015; November, 2015; May, 2015; April, 2016.
- VYPER Output and Outcome Graphics.
- VYPER's semi-annual progress reports to Health Canada.
- Six VYPER newsletters (Fall, 2014 to Winter, 2016)

Evaluation Limitations

While 10 adults were interviewed about the youth-adult partnership grants they received from VYPER, only three youth were interested and available to be interviewed (others were contacted but did not volunteer to take part). Therefore, the perspective of grantees described in this report may not be representative of the youth who took part in youth-adult partnership grants.

Youth who took part in focus groups, as well as adults, shared their thoughts on reasons young people may disengage from VYPER. However, the perspectives of youth who did disengage were not captured.

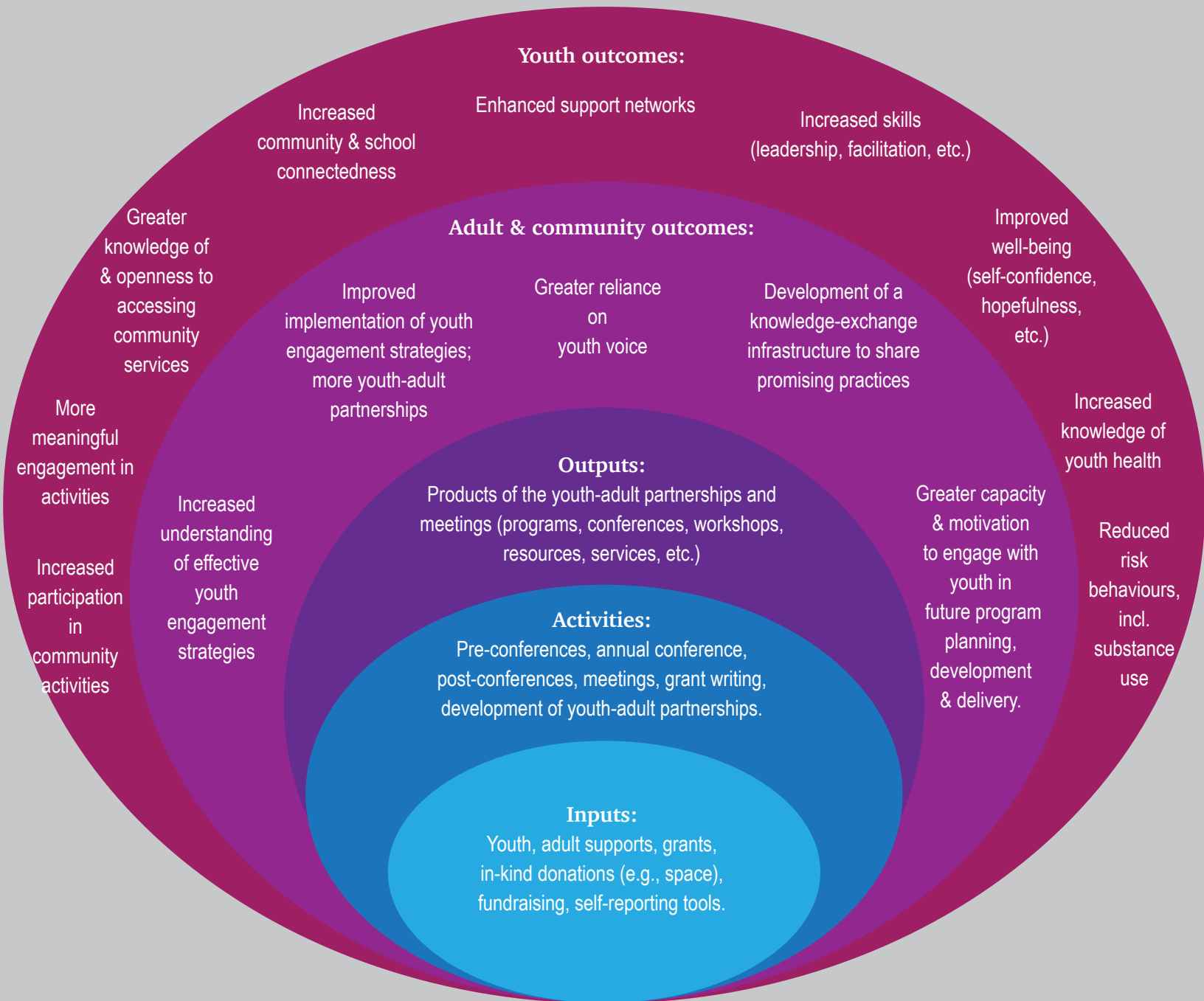
About the Report

Quantitative analyses were carried out using SPSS version 22. All comparisons and associations included in this report are statistically significant at $p < .05$. This means there is up to a 5% likelihood the results occurred by chance. When numbers were too small to report quantitatively, they were reported descriptively to reduce the risk of deductive disclosure.

Qualitative data were organized into themes and integrated with the quantitative findings in this report.

Quotations throughout this report are from youth who completed surveys or took part in interviews or focus groups, unless otherwise indicated (i.e., it is noted when quotes are from staff or other adults).

Logic Model



YOUTH'S BACKGROUND

Youth who completed a survey ranged in age from 12 to 24 years, and their average age was 17½. Youth were most commonly 16 or 17 years old (31%).

A little over half (53%) identified as female, while 36% identified as male, and the rest as another gender identity (e.g., gender fluid, genderqueer). In response to an open-ended question about their sexual orientation, 56% of youth identified as straight/heterosexual, while 20% identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, 14% as pansexual, and the rest indicated they were questioning or did not know who they were attracted to.

Youth most commonly identified as European (58%) and/or Aboriginal (37%). Others identified as South Asian, Australian, or did not know their background.

The vast majority of youth had been born in Canada, and all had lived in the country for six or more years. Most youth (71%) were currently living in Fraser East (most commonly Chilliwack, 21%; Agassiz, 13%; and Mission, 13%), while the rest were in Fraser North (16%; most commonly Port Coquitlam, Coquitlam, and New Westminster) and Fraser South (Surrey; 13%).

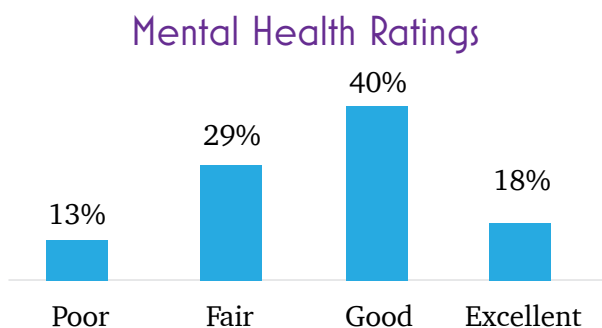
Work & School

Forty-one percent of youth were currently working at a paid job, and 74% were volunteering outside of VYPER, with no differences based on age or gender identity.

Most youth (82%) were enrolled in school, with 59% in high school (or the equivalent) and 23% in post-secondary education.

Health

Fifty-eight percent of youth rated their mental health as good or excellent, whereas the rest rated it as fair or poor. Percentages were comparable for physical health.



Future Plans

When asked where they saw themselves in five years, youth most commonly envisioned having a job (82%). They also saw themselves graduated from school (54%), engaged in their community (49%), travelling (46%), in a committed relationship (44%), having a home of their own (39%), in school (26%), and/or raising children (23%; they could choose more than one response). Females were more likely than males to expect to be travelling in five years (a majority of females vs. a minority of males), but there were no other gender differences.

PARTICIPANTS' DESCRIPTION OF VYPER

“VYPER creates and facilitates community building projects and educational workshops. It's a safe space for youth and adults.”

Youth focus group participants said their involvement in VYPER revolved around weekly area meetings in which youth took turns leading the discussions and taking minutes. Youth could also attend larger regional meetings each month, as well as other events or conferences they were interested in. Youth explained that the area and regional meetings were an opportunity for young people to get together to plan projects, presentations and workshops.

Staff explained that the meetings were structured around VYPER's mission to 'create pathways for youth to move from isolation to a sense of belonging in their communities.' When new youth attended a meeting, staff asked them what VYPER's mission and vision meant to them, and youth would develop projects around these ideas. Although there were certain activities and outputs that were expected of them by their funder (Health Canada), how the activities were carried out and came to fruition were decided by the youth with adults' support. Similarly, youth said the meetings and project development were mostly youth-led and that adults were involved to guide discussions and provide structure and support when needed.

Youth said they could choose the activities they wanted to be involved in, such as reviewing grant applications, grant writing, event planning, developing and facilitating workshops, and developing and implementing youth-led projects. Their youth-led projects focused on meeting the needs of young people in their community. Examples included redesigning a drop-in program, helping youth to access needed mental health and substance use services, and developing an after-school tutoring program. Youth in some focus groups said they worked on projects in partnership with other community organizations.

Some youth said they had discussed project ideas but had not yet had an opportunity to implement them, and instead their projects were carried out by other VYPER groups (in other areas of the Fraser region). They explained that if one area had many project ideas, these would be shared at regional meetings and then dispersed to other areas that might be looking for projects to work on.

In addition to taking on smaller projects in their community, youth explained they had opportunities to be involved in larger regional projects. For example, VYPER youth from various areas came together to plan the VOYCE conference (Voice of Youth for Community Engagement), as well as a regional conference to share information with service providers on how best to reach out to, engage, and work with young people.

Staff felt that VYPER activities and projects were generally carried out as planned, although some elements changed along the way. They explained that because the mission and vision were broad, and VYPER was carried out as an experimental project, it enabled staff to be flexible and make changes throughout the process, as long as any given shift in course was directly connected to the mission and vision. Many staff expressed appreciation for the flexibility and the focus on process

and relationship-building, which was consistent with findings from the Staff Reflection and Feedback Retreat (Grigg, 2016). Staff added that VYPER not only provided support to youth, but also to other agencies to foster youth-adult partnerships in their community.

How Youth Got Involved

Focus group participants had heard about VYPER in different ways. Several youth said their friends had recommended they join VYPER. For example, friends told them about the various project opportunities, as well as free food and honoraria they received through VYPER, which was an incentive for the youth to get involved themselves. Others had been encouraged to attend by their relatives, youth worker, or drug and alcohol counsellor. A few youth had become involved as a condition of their probation, and continued to stay involved after their involvement with the justice system ended.

A number of youth said they had heard about VYPER through other community projects or agencies they had been involved with, or through attending VYPER's youth-led VYPERence conference. Other youth had heard about VYPER through a project staff member who had been doing outreach in their community.

Staff said that many youth had been connected to VYPER through a mental health or substance use counsellor. These youth then invited their friends to attend, and the numbers grew through word-of-mouth.

Why Youth Got Involved

Youth's reasons for becoming involved with VYPER included a desire to interact with other young people and make friends. Taking part in meaningful activities was another reason, and some explained there were few activities available for youth in their community and that VYPER helped to fill that gap.

A few youth said they wanted to be involved in activities or projects relating to mental health and substance use prevention because of their personal mental health or substance use challenges. Others with substance use challenges felt their involvement with VYPER would help them avoid using substances.

A number of youth said they got involved to give back to their community or improve their community. For example, some wanted to improve the image of youth in their community and to help give youth a voice. Other youth identified the honoraria and volunteer hours they received through VYPER as their reasons for getting involved.

Reasons for getting involved were similar among youth who completed a survey. The majority (74%) reported getting involved to take part in meaningful activities. Other reasons were to meet other young people (49%), feel connected to their community (49%), and to access community services (23%). Youth also indicated wanting to have their voice heard and to affect positive change for young people in their community.

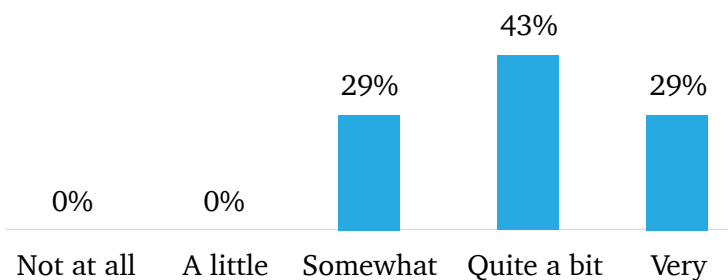
MEANINGFUL YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

“I like interacting with a diverse group of youth in a good atmosphere with kind people.”

Youth focus group participants described their involvement with VYPER as very meaningful. They said the project changed based on the needs of the youth at any given time, which helped to make it meaningful to those involved.

Similarly, most youth who completed a survey (72%) rated the VYPER activities they were involved in as quite a bit or very meaningful. Most (82%) also felt their ideas were listened to and acted upon in the VYPER activities they were involved in. Additionally, 87% of youth attributed their involvement with VYPER to increasing their meaningful engagement in community activities.

How meaningful youth felt their VYPER activities were



Note. Percentages exceed 100% due to rounding.

Staff described a core group of youth who were extremely and consistently engaged with VYPER, while the engagement of other youth fluctuated. Some added that many youth who disengaged from VYPER eventually reconnected in some capacity. A couple of staff said the goal of VYPER was not necessarily to keep youth involved with VYPER but to connect them to other community projects and services, which they felt VYPER was successful at doing.

Youth in the focus groups said they appreciated VYPER’s low-barrier approach, which allowed young people to be engaged and involved with VYPER to whatever degree they were able. Youth also appreciated that some VYPER staff had the education and training to support young people with their mental health and other challenges. Staff added that they referred youth with severe mental health challenges to counselling services in the community when the support offered through VYPER was not sufficient for their needs.

Reasons for Staying Engaged

Youth and staff said that incentives, such as food and honoraria, as well as transit tickets, helped to bring young people in. Moreover, youth spoke of how the welcoming and non-judgemental atmosphere encouraged young people to stay involved with VYPER. For example, they appreciated that young parents were allowed to bring their children to meetings.

Some youth said it took a few meetings for them to feel comfortable with the other youth and staff in the room, but that once they got to know one another better, they felt connected and a sense of belonging.

Youth as well as staff said that by young people creating and adhering to a community agreement, it helped to ensure the environment stayed safe and it fostered a sense of community which encouraged youth to stay involved. Staff added that involving youth in the process of developing the community agreement led them to care more about it and to stay invested and engaged.

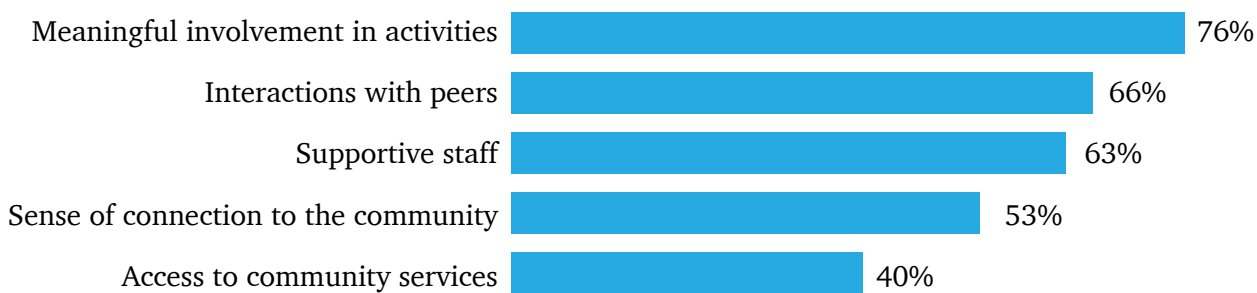
Youth explained that unlike their experiences with other projects, VYPER emphasized the importance of youth voice and they felt their opinions were heard and valued, which motivated them to stay engaged. They appreciated how youth-centred and youth-led VYPER was. They felt that VYPER staff heard and valued their ideas, considered their needs and wants, and supported them to turn their ideas into action. Some also said the youth-adult partnerships that were fostered through VYPER, and the equal power distribution between youth and adults, helped to engage disenfranchised youth who tended to be leery of adults and institutions.

Staff also said it was important to be flexible and meet youth where they were at, such as by scheduling meetings at times that worked best for the youth, and shifting the meeting times if their schedules changed. Further, staff highlighted that to keep youth engaged it was important to work with them from a strength-based perspective and develop trusting relationships. To foster trust among youth, staff felt it was important to ask youth what they wanted, as well as to clarify the parameters of the project (i.e., what was possible and not possible to do) so that youth knew what to expect from the outset.

In addition, youth explained that seeing positive outcomes arise from their projects, and realizing they could have an influence, was satisfying and motivated them to stay engaged.

Among youth who completed a survey, the most commonly reported reasons for staying engaged in VYPER were similar to their reasons for initially getting involved. These included involvement in meaningful activities, interacting with peers, a sense of connection to the community, and access to needed community services through VYPER. Additionally, most youth identified the supportive staff as a reason for staying involved.

Most commonly identified reasons for staying engaged in VYPER (youth survey)



Note: Youth could mark all that applied.

A few staff members felt that because youth could opt out of VYPER at any time, those who made the decision to attend a meeting were by definition fully engaged. Staff pointed out that engagement might look different for different youth. For example, even though a young person might not verbally contribute during a meeting they might still be engaged and find the experience meaningful. In addition, a few staff said that youth involved with VYPER were more engaged than other young people they had worked with in the past. Even if a youth was not initially interested in a specific VYPER project that other young people had taken on, they typically found ways to engage in the project to make it personally meaningful.

Challenges Engaging Youth

“I know youth who want to do more things, they just don’t know VYPER is here.”

Youth in some focus groups said it was challenging to encourage other young people to take part in VYPER. One reason was the difficulty explaining VYPER to others, which youth felt was a barrier to involving more youth. Others spoke about the need for more advertisement about VYPER so that more youth knew it existed.

Youth also felt it was challenging to encourage others to take part for the ‘right’ reasons. They felt frustrated when they perceived that other youth accessed VYPER simply for the honorarium or free meals and did not engage in the meetings or project planning. However, the youth acknowledged the varied experiences, abilities, and situations of young people, and that youth’s circumstances and challenges (e.g., substance use and mental health challenges) might limit their ability to fully engage and commit to VYPER. Also, with the wide age range, sometimes younger youth were more likely to become distracted and lose focus, although participants felt it was positive that these youth still attended despite not being fully engaged at all times. A few staff members said it was particularly challenging to engage younger youth, specifically those aged 12 to 14.

Staff identified transportation as a major challenge to engaging youth, because many needed rides to VYPER meetings and events. Youth also felt that transportation was a barrier. They said the area facilitator picked some youth up and drove them to meetings but that if many youth needed transportation, this approach would not work because there were a limited number of seats in the car and a limited number of trips the facilitator could make.

Youth and staff also discussed how it was sometimes difficult to fit VYPER around young people’s already busy schedules.

Once engaged with VYPER, some youth said a risk of disengaging was that the pace felt slow at times. For example, they might arrive at a meeting feeling energized and excited to take action, but would leave feeling frustrated because not enough progress was made or there was lack of momentum or continuity from a previous meeting which hindered progress.

A few youth felt that another risk of disengaging from VYPER was that young people's roles were not clearly defined. One suggestion was to clarify participants' roles and responsibilities so that each youth felt greater responsibility and commitment to the project, and would be less likely to disengage. However, others appreciated the flexibility that came with not having clearly designated roles and responsibilities.

"I love the feeling of working on meaningful projects in the community."

"It keeps me more engaged when we have projects and we can see progress...makes me want to stay involved."

"I like the fact that we have a voice. I like the fact that I'm helping other young adults/youth like myself, and to see the community grow strong."

"I like how much VYPER values youth voice. The adult isn't running the show, youth are running the show."

"In VYPER you can say anything, it never gets put down."

"Being able to have my voice influence the youth of today, its revolutionary for youth's lives."

"In VYPER, youth's ideas are listened to all the time, more than I've felt in any other program."

"I see the positive outcomes of specific projects we have worked on or primarily been a part of. We're successful in our efforts to make a difference in lives."

"Voice heard, planting seeds, growing trees, being a part of something."

"I have been able to have a voice and my opinion heard."

"With VYPER, stuff actually happens as opposed to just talking about doing something."

"I really enjoy the sense of belonging and being able to state my idea and knowing it is being respected by supportive adults."

"I felt heard, like someone actually cared and like something was actually being done. I felt hope, for the first time in forever."

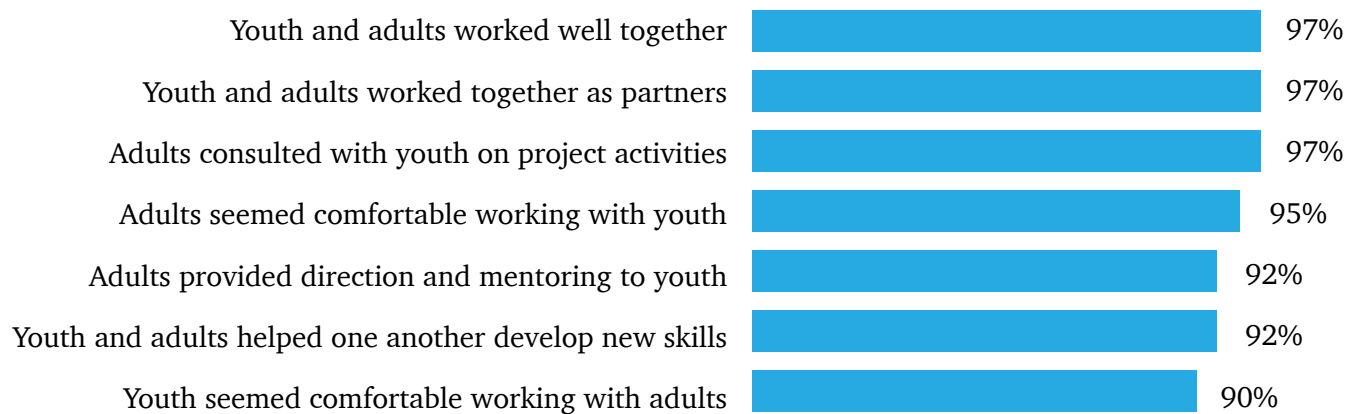
"I think it's so critical to give youth a voice because it's something that keeps them invested and produces better outcomes when they have the opportunity to be in charge of the work they do." – VYPER staff

Youth-Adult Relationships

Many focus group participants talked about feeling meaningfully engaged in VYPER activities because youth had an equal partnership with the adults they worked with. They said youth had a voice in all activities, ran meetings 50/50 with adults, and that all their opinions, ideas, and concerns were heard.

Similarly, the vast majority of survey respondents felt that youth and adults worked well together on VYPER projects, that adults appropriately consulted with youth on project activities, and adults provided direction and mentoring to youth. Further, most youth felt that youth and adults worked together as partners, and youth and adults helped one another develop new skills.

Youth-adult relationships (youth survey)



In the focus groups, a number of youth said their positive experience interacting with adults and feeling heard and validated helped to reduce their anxiety about approaching adults for support and guidance.

When asked in the focus groups about their relationships with VYPER staff, youth felt that VYPER staff listened to them and showed them respect. They said that if youth had a project idea, staff would typically work with them to make it happen. Youth explained that VYPER staff usually helped with project organization but took a hands-off approach in terms of project development and planning. For example, youth's experience with the VYPERence conference was that staff were only in charge of supervision, budgeting, and planning the length of the conference. The youth were responsible for everything else, including the content of the conference.

Staff pointed out that there were appropriate and less appropriate places to involve youth, and they felt VYPER involved youth in all the appropriate places. For example, youth were involved in decisions around staff hiring; developing the grant process and allocating funding; and planning, delivering, and evaluating events. Examples of less appropriate places where youth were not involved were meetings that were about and led by adults. As well, staff would not opt-in on youth's behalf, such as by taking on responsibilities or projects for them, without first asking the youth.

Staff brought up the vastly different ideas and experiences that different youth might have, and therefore the importance of canvassing the thoughts and opinions of the specific group of youth which adults were working with at any given time. Staff also discussed the importance of listening to youth's voice and getting their input about services, and barriers to accessing services, to increase the likelihood of youth accessing services in the community.

A few adults who were interviewed about the youth-adult partnership grants said they appreciated a VYPER meeting they had initially attended which entailed youth speaking and adults listening. They felt it was a useful and informative process which helped them understand youth's thoughts and actions, and to expand their understanding of youth voice and meaningful engagement through youth-adult partnerships. Similarly, youth and staff mentioned a session at the VYPERence conference where service providers and other adults asked youth questions about accessing community services, and listened to their responses. They felt this reflected an important shift in youth-adult relationships, and that both youth and adults learned from the experience.

Youth felt VYPER helped dispel stereotypes that adults might have about young people and conversely that youth might have about adults, and facilitated the development of positive relationships and partnerships among youth and adults in the community. Youth also said that experiencing respectful interactions with adults helped them feel more comfortable working with adults on a common goal (e.g., finding ways to support marginalized youth in their community).

“The adults listen to you and actually use your ideas.”

“I’m learning how to interact with adults better.”

“VYPER has helped me feel comfortable/open talking to adults.”

“I love the fact that it doesn’t matter how old or young you are, everyone is treated the same.”

“I feel at the same level as the adults.”

“It’s nice to have respect from adults.”

“VYPER helped me realize that adults aren’t so scary and it’s helped me build better relationships.”

“I have built really, really great relationships with VYPER staff.”

“VYPER staff help improve youth-adult partnerships.”

“If we don’t have the voice of the people we’re trying to serve, we’re running the danger of miss-allocating resources.” – VYPER staff

Youth-Adult Partnership Grants

VYPER staff explained that there were two tiers of grants. The first was a ‘mini grant’ of \$500 that adults could apply for. The funds from this grant were allotted to organize meetings for youth to get together to apply for the second-tier grant. Only youth could apply for this latter grant of up to \$10,000 which was primarily allotted to funding youth coordinator positions. These positions were created by youth, in partnership with a community organization. Youth involved with VYPER reviewed and approved grants at regional meetings.

The grantees who participated in the evaluation said they were in varying phases of their youth-adult partnership projects. A few were involved with projects that had just started (e.g., they had just hired the youth contractors), while a couple of others were part-way through their projects, and a number had completed their projects. A few of those who had completed their projects through VYPER said they had received funding from other sources to continue their projects for at least another year.

Several explained that their grants included hiring a youth contractor (many of whom were affiliated with VYPER) and providing other young people with honoraria for taking part. Most identified specific project activities, such as organizing a youth-led conference, workshop, event, or educational outing, or creating a youth drop-in centre. A few others said their project was more meeting-based, with a focus on youth and adults discussing and making decisions on specific issues.

All grantees who were interviewed said that youth had come up with the project’s goals and activities, and most said that youth had written the grant that was submitted to VYPER. Grantees generally said there had been no changes in their project’s goals since they had submitted their grant. Some explained that the grant application asked for general information and not specific details, which meant that any refinements they later made to project activities still fell within their broad project goals. The few who reported some changes to how they approached their goals (e.g., changes in project activities) said that youth had a voice in these changes.

VYPER staff said they made sure to fund organizations who were genuinely interested in engaging in youth-adult partnerships, as opposed to those who planned to engage youth in a tokenistic way.

Adults’ roles

Grantees said the role of adults was predominantly to offer youth support and guidance. However, some youth also wanted adults to provide them with more structure. For example, according to adults, some youth’s feedback was that they wanted adult support with organizing meetings and helping with timelines, although other youth did not want adults to be involved in this way. Adults also said they helped clarify to youth the parameters of the project to ensure the activities stayed safe and on budget.

Youth-led meetings & activities

Most grantees said that young people led and facilitated project meetings and activities, including meetings which involved adults. A few noted they valued having joint youth-adult meetings, which they felt helped youth to improve their self-confidence interacting with adults, and helped

adults to appreciate youth's leadership skills. A couple of adults said that when youth led the meetings their approach was not necessarily the one that adults would choose, but acknowledged the importance of having youth-led meetings.

Decision-making

All adults who were interviewed said that youth had a voice in project decisions. Some said that adults took all adult-made decisions back to the youth to get their input, or that youth were a part of every decision-making process but did not necessarily have the final say in every decision. Others said that decision-making was evenly split between adults and youth, while others explained that decisions were made primarily by the youth, such as hiring decisions and decisions about what adults' role on the project should be.

Youth who were interviewed felt they had a voice in project decisions and activities, although one comment was that while youth had the freedom to make decisions at the outset, they felt that adults took over by the end. Some adults reported that youth at times wanted to move forward very quickly and would become frustrated with how slow they felt the process was taking. These adults appreciated the youth's excitement and enthusiasm but felt the youth did not understand all the steps and advanced planning that were needed to achieve the project goals.

Support from VYPER staff

VYPER staff said that one of their roles was to support youth-adult partnerships in the community by helping adults to shift the way they engaged with youth. Some referred to this as getting people "vyped" or "vyperizing" the community. They hoped this process would ultimately lead to a larger cultural shift in how adults saw and treated young people.

Grantees greatly appreciated the support they received from VYPER staff. They said they received a lot of support at the beginning, particularly with the grant application, and this support waned once the project was running and the need for support decreased. However, most of those who asked VYPER for support during their project said they received it and were satisfied with it. Some adults voiced appreciation for reminders and guidance around how to keep the project youth-driven and how to ensure that youth felt heard and valued.

A few said the suggestions they received from VYPER staff felt too prescriptive at times, in terms of how youth engagement should be carried out in their particular project, although still appreciated receiving support.

"[VYPER staff] were supportive and great, ensuring that it was a youth-driven project – that was their role, always reminding us to take it back to the youth. It was an interesting project in that we heard enough from VYPER that we were finally able to get it." –Adult grantee

"VYPER is an anchor and support to other organizations." –VYPER staff

Community partners

Some grantees listed a number of community partners affiliated with their project, such as educational institutions, other local non-profit agencies, provincial government ministries (e.g., MCFD), and municipal government.

However, others said their projects did not entail community partnerships. Some explained they had worked in partnership with a few agencies at the start but that these partnerships had dissolved by the end. A few of these grantees were unsure about the reasons, while others identified people's busy schedules and challenges finding meeting times that worked for everyone. Others who had just begun their project said they were still working on developing community partnerships.

Those who identified project partners felt the project benefited from these partnerships. They said the different perspectives and ideas on how to accomplish the project's goals were informative and useful. A few said that although they valued the diverse perspectives and enthusiasm from project partners, they also identified this as a challenge to staying focused.

A couple of grantees said it was intimidating for youth to attend meetings with adults from partner agencies whom they did not know very well. They felt more could have been done to make the environment more relaxed so that youth felt more comfortable.

Quality monitoring

Grantees were asked how the quality of the youth-adult partnership was monitored. Many said there was no formal monitoring but it was monitored informally through conversations with VYPER staff. Some said they would have liked a more formal approach, such as regular feedback sessions among youth, adult supports, and perhaps VYPER staff. They felt that receiving regular feedback would help to ensure that everyone's roles and responsibilities were clear and that youth and adults were satisfied with the relationship, and it would facilitate making changes if any were needed.

VYPER managers felt that if there had been more capacity within their staff team (e.g., a larger, skilled staff team), they would have been able to do more quality control with the youth-adult partnership projects across the region, and would have been able to offer more support to grantees throughout the process. Despite not being able to provide as much quality control as they would have liked, they ensured that all VYPER-related projects involved no harm to youth and that youth stayed safe.

Challenges

Some adults said they initially did not understand the role of the youth contractor and how much support adults should be providing to the young person in this role. They felt VYPER could have provided their agency with more guidance around the youth's role and how they could best support the youth. They also felt it would have been helpful to receive information and guidance around liability issues associated with hiring a youth (e.g., whether parental consent was needed for the youth to attend events; the paperwork needed when hiring a youth; payment issues and tax forms).

Adults also felt it was challenging to find a balance between letting the youth lead on the one hand, and stepping in on the other. For example, in one project the adult staff felt the approach youth adopted was not in line with their agency's values and mission, and staff struggled with this discordance. Similarly, youth who were interviewed felt that adults' vision for the project did

not always mesh with what the young people wanted to do. Youth suggested that adults not give advice at the start but wait to see what the youth come up with, and then work with the youth to create concordance.

VYPER staff remarked it was challenging for many adults to embrace a paradigm shift and to treat youth as partners in their work. Not only did youth need to have the space to speak but adults needed to listen to them and to trust the process.

Other challenges identified by grantees included conflicts between the youth project facilitator and other young people involved in the project. Adults felt they could have encouraged more communication throughout the process—among the youth facilitator, other youth, and adult supports—which would have helped the adults identify conflicts earlier and support youth in resolving them.

In addition, high staff turn-over within agencies created confusion about individual staff's roles and responsibilities, and who youth should turn to for project support, and made it difficult for the project to progress. Adults felt that better communication among adults within their agency, as well as with VYPER staff, would have been helpful for the project to run more smoothly.

Some adults felt it was challenging to find the time to adequately support youth with their project, in addition to managing their other responsibilities. They said that support from VYPER staff was helpful, and some would have appreciated more support throughout the process. Another idea was to hire a youth engagement staff member (adult) who would take on the role of supporting youth with their project.

Low numbers of youth attending meetings or events was another challenge identified by adults. To overcome this challenge, adults asked youth who did attend about how to improve overall attendance, and the youth provided suggestions (e.g., offering pizza and having gift card draws) which helped to increase the numbers. A suggestion from a grantee was to hire a core group of youth and frame their involvement as a job, which might increase the likelihood of youth staying involved. Another issue was that some youth who had been involved in the project on a regular basis had to stop taking part due to mental health challenges, moving to another city, or other commitments (e.g., work, parenting).

Grantees in smaller, rural communities which offered services to youth across a wide geographical area identified physical geography and lack of transportation as barriers to youth attending meetings and events. They felt that transportation should be thought about in advance and incorporated into their grant applications (e.g., access to a van to pick up youth) to increase the likelihood of engaging young people.

Another challenge, identified by youth, was that it was difficult for young people who did not know each other to feel comfortable working together on a project. A suggestion was to organize social events for the youth at the start, as well as throughout the project, so that youth had an opportunity to get to know one another and have fun together, which would help them feel more comfortable working together.

Some grantees mentioned that the success of their project was not measured or evaluated. This made it difficult to demonstrate their project's outcomes and to document their project's impact in the community.

“I love the work and mission of VYPER. My on-going challenge is while it is vitally important to engage youth in the work we do, this also takes proper training, supervision and support (for both the adults working with youth, and the youth leaders we are trying to work with). This is hard to do off the side of our desk, with limited funds and staffing. I feel it is vitally important to have the infrastructure (funding, resources, support) in place for any work meant to support youth engagement to be long term and sustainable.” –Adult ally who completed VYPER’s community self-report survey.

Successes

Grantees pointed out that many of the youth involved in the youth-adult partnerships struggled with mental health and substance use challenges, and a number had disengaged from school prior to their involvement with the project. Grantees felt that these high-risk youth being engaged in the project was an indicator of success. Also, working on the grant and then receiving it was seen as a success to many youth, who felt proud of their accomplishment and the skills they learned in the process. Grantees explained that this positive experience gave some youth the confidence to apply for another grant (outside VYPER) which they subsequently received.

Some grantees pointed out that although not all their expected outputs were achieved (e.g., youth not facilitating the expected number of workshops), there were significant successes stemming from the process of relationship-building. They felt the process of developing youth-adult relationships, and receiving support and validation from adults, as well as developing friendships with other youth, was a success in itself which also contributed to other positive outcomes such as improved mental health. (More details about mental health and other outcomes are included in the next section.)

In addition, youth, adult grantees, and VYPER staff felt that adults gained knowledge and understanding through the youth-adult partnerships. For example, they became more aware of the issues youth in their community were facing, thought about youth engagement differently now, and came to value the importance of giving youth decision-making power.

Some adults also reported gaining a better understanding of grant writing. They felt the knowledge and skills they learned through VYPER relating to grants would help their organization when applying for future grants.

When grantees were asked if their project contributed to the development or enhancement of youth-adult partnerships within their community, some felt it had whereas others felt it had contributed to the development of these partnerships within their agency but not necessarily the larger community. They explained that senior management in their agency had shifted their framework and now regarding youth-adult partnerships and youth voice as essential in the work they did.

VYPER staff felt that youth-adult partnerships had increased or had been enhanced in the community. Some said that service providers now connected directly with VYPER youth to collaborate on projects. Staff also noted that agencies were now more likely to consistently involve youth in hiring committees, and that when service providers were hired by youth it made them feel more accountable to the youth they worked with.

Staff also said there was media coverage on the work that VYPER youth were involved in, which helped to reframe adults' views on what young people were capable of achieving when provided with opportunities to contribute and with adult support. Staff were hopeful that this change in perspective could lead to a larger-scale mentality shift about young people and their capabilities, and to the fostering of more youth-adult partnerships in the community.

Comments from adult grantees:

“Sometimes the youth open up to us about struggles with friends or home life and things they don’t have anyone else to talk to about. Just a reminder it’s about relationships.”

“It’s always really nice to sit down with a group of young people and see how responsive young people are, how passionate and how many ideas they have – their voice really is often unheard. Supporting them to grow has been inspiring for me to witness.”

“We worked really well together and I think the youth appreciated that someone was listening to them and giving them that respected voice – they don’t get that a lot. They’re so used to getting told what to do instead of being asked what they want. This stood out to me.”

“I think the project really got us thinking a lot more about youth voice and letting our decisions be guided through youth voice. ...This was trying to actually change how we do business.”

“It’s really great to see the passion and enthusiasm that a lot of the youth have, and the feeling they can do something, like make an impact on other people.”

Comments from youth grantees:

“Adults got better at letting youth take the lead more.”

“I’m very comfortable working with adults. VYPER has definitely helped in teaching me how to have youth-adult partnerships and made it a lot easier to connect.”

Comments from VYPER staff:

“It was amazing to see a shift in youth-adult relationships and understanding take place, of being able to enact larger theories of practice that are mostly talked about or observed.”

“We have lots of adults that have now learned a new skill where they’re not simply providing services to youth but engaging in a service with the youth.”

“Adults have really found themselves asking, ‘Is our current way working? And if not, is it because we haven’t involved youth?’ I think those questions at the very least are being asked and that’s really important.”

“When adults see youth speaking so eloquently about the process [of youth-adult partnerships], it can be impactful to the community.”

Knowledge-exchange

“Sharing knowledge across communities is one of our greatest strengths.” –VYPER staff

Staff said there was ample opportunity through VYPER to share and learn about promising practices for meaningful youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships. These included small-scale opportunities, such as at every VYPER meeting, as well as larger-scale opportunities, such as conferences with ‘thought leaders.’

Staff added that youth-adult partnerships are complex and take time to explain. They had the opportunity to explain these partnerships to various community stakeholders, youth, government officials within the Ministry of Children and Family Development, mental health and substance use service providers, and other interested stakeholders.

In addition, the youth-adult partnership coordinator travelled to different communities to share lessons learned about youth-adult partnerships and to connect with community partners.

Staff expressed enthusiasm about the sharing that took place across regions and communities. In addition, practicum students said they had the opportunity to share knowledge about youth engagement practices and youth-adult partnerships with their teachers and other professionals.

Moving forward

All grantees said they intended to continue using the youth-adult partnership that was created as part of their project. They hoped their project would be sustainable after their funding from VYPER ended. They were also hoping to develop new youth-adult partnerships, and many had specific plans in place.

All VYPER staff said they would be interested in supporting youth-adult partnerships in the future. Some explained it was the most effective way of developing, delivering and designing programs for youth. A few staff members said it would be important to ensure there was enough support to do the work properly in future youth-adult partnerships. This would include having enough money to compensate youth for their time, and having the flexibility within an organization to take the work in the needed direction.

Staff added that funding agencies needed to not only acknowledge the importance of the work but also to commit to supporting it financially, which was consistent with comments in the two-week staff reflections (internal VYPER report).

Community Capacity Building Tool

The CCBT included questions in nine domains: Participation (the active involvement of individuals in the project); leadership (nurturing the development of both formal and informal local leaders); community structures (creating and developing links to smaller groups in the community that foster belonging); external funding supports (funding bodies, such as government and regional health authorities); asking why (a community process that uncovers the root causes of health issues and promotes solutions); obtaining resources (e.g., finding time, leadership, volunteers, information to move the project forward); skills, knowledge, and learning (qualities in the project team, target population, and larger community that the team draws on); linking with others (e.g., creating partnerships to help the community address important issues); and sense of community (fostered through building trust with others).

Most items had five response options (“just started,” “on the road,” “nearly there,” “we’re there,” and “not applicable”), whereas the other items were yes/no or open-ended questions. “Not applicable” responses were set to missing for quantitative analyses.

CCBT mean scale scores in the 9 domains



Note: The mean score for “Sense of community” was not significantly different at Time 1 and Time 2.

Quantitative analyses indicated significant improvements over time on most CCBT items (Wilcoxon signed-rank tests, p 's < .05). For example, at Time 1 most communities (83%) reported they had not yet thought about who they could work with in the target population to find solutions to the root causes of identified issues, whereas by Time 2 most (83%) had an agreement with key people in the community, or had an effective process in place, to work together to find root causes. Also, at Time 2 communities were more likely than at Time 1 to have the necessary skills and knowledge to make their project successful.

At the domain level, there were changes over time in eight of the nine domains. “Sense of community” was the area where there was no significant change (and also the sole domain that consisted only of one item with five response options). A likely reason for no significant change in this domain is that at Time 1 a few communities already felt their project was successful in building a sense of community, and some commented that the simple existence of their project contributed to this sense of community.

Youth and adults discussed other successes stemming from VYPER, beyond the development of youth-adult partnerships and a greater understanding of meaningful youth engagement. Participants saw many of these successes as outcomes of youth’s meaningful engagement in VYPER activities and projects.

Comments from VYPER’s community self-report surveys:

“I would like to say that VYPER has put some amazing and valuable members of its team in our rural community... Thank you to all of VYPER staff and leaders for their steadfast and grounded approach to embracing youth as they are and honouring the value in each youth.”

“I am grateful to have VYPER working in our community.”

“The voice of the youth has provided very valuable insight for future planning & delivery of services to youth. It can help in making youth feel more welcomed, included & certainly heard as we provide these services.”

“VYPER has provided a framework for my organization to try something that would have been too difficult for us to organize on our own. The help and funding has been invaluable.”

“Thank you so much for all you do in providing youth with a voice.”

“When VYPER staff arrived in our community to push youth engagement, it was refreshing and pushed the community to develop a streamlined [way] for youth engagement to influence all levels of services.”

“Having VYPER here to advocate and share information is an asset to the community. There are not many organizations that are taking the lead on promoting healthy youth development through a population health lens...this initiative fills a very important need.”

“VYPER has challenged our way of engaging with youth, driven in the importance of meaningful engagement, inspired us to try something new for engagement.”

OTHER SUCCESSES & OUTCOMES

Connections & Access to Supports

Staff felt one of their roles was to support youth in accessing service providers and networks they would typically not have access to.

A number of youth focus group participants said their involvement in VYPER led to their development of connections in the community and a larger support network. Some said they had become more open to forming relationships and had made new friends through VYPER. Several talked about feeling isolated before getting involved with VYPER and said their involvement helped them feel more engaged and connected to their community. Similarly, staff said that for some youth it was their first time experiencing healthy relationships with adults and having an adult they could turn to for support and guidance. According to staff, youth also gained a network of young people with similar experiences, and these social connections helped to increase youth's sense of belonging.

Youth said their involvement with VYPER led to other opportunities in the community, including taking part in fundraising events, awareness projects, and other community events they would not have otherwise had the opportunity to take part in.

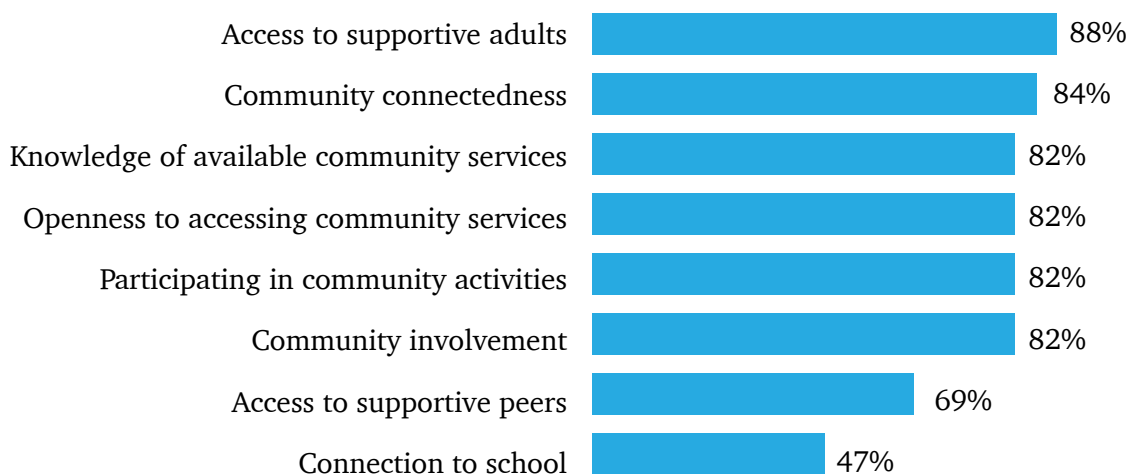
Youth, grantees, and staff said that young people's experiences with the youth-adult partnership projects helped them realize they can contribute to positive change in their community, which inspired some to become even more involved in their community. This involvement included sitting on various committees and boards to advocate for young people, and taking part in other volunteer work.

Some youth said that by being involved in projects, events, and conferences through VYPER, they were able to learn about community services and had a better understanding of where they could go to access different services and supports. They also learned about community services and events through the information their area facilitators shared with them, or when service providers approached VYPER to work on projects or special events. Other youth said they already knew about available community services before their involvement with VYPER, but their involvement helped to expand their knowledge of what the different services offered.

Similarly, staff felt that youth learned about available community services and supports through VYPER, particularly youth in rural and small suburban areas who otherwise had less access to this type of information than those in urban centres. Adult grantees added that youth learned about available community services and supports through the youth-adult partnerships and then shared this knowledge with their peers, which helped to support other young people.

Youth's survey responses mirrored what was said in the focus groups. Most survey respondents reported increased involvement in, and connection to, their community due to their participation in VYPER activities. They also reported greater access to supportive peers and adults, as well as increased knowledge of available community services, and openness to accessing these services.

Increased connections & access to supports because of youth's involvement with VYPER



Note. Youth who reported 'quite a bit' or 'very much' improvement.

Females were more likely than males to report increased involvement in the community (95% vs. 69%). There were no other gender differences, or differences based on age or length of time youth had been involved with VYPER.

In the focus groups and interviews, youth and staff said that young people not only learned about available community services but also accessed needed services after learning about them through VYPER. These included rehab/substance use counselling, youth shelters, health centres, mental health services (including early psychosis clinics), sexual health clinics, employment services, food banks, housing services, and youth drop-ins. Staff also identified other community resources that youth were now accessing because of VYPER, including leisure activities and the library.

Youth were asked in the survey about specific services or supports they had accessed through VYPER, and they had most commonly accessed a youth drop-in centre.

Services most commonly accessed through VYPER	
Youth drop-in centre	43%
Life-skills training	32%
Recreation	31%
Medical services	29%
Mental health services	29%
Youth health clinic	28%
Employment services/training	25%
Substance use counselling/rehab	16%
Alternative therapies	16%

Note. Youth could select all that applied.

When asked about services they had not accessed but wanted to access, youth most commonly identified life-skills training (28%), employment services/training (27%), alternative therapies (20%), and housing services (17%).

“What I like about VYPER is making connections with my community and being able to speak my mind.”

“Because of VYPER I have lots of connections to service providers. I’m very thankful for the connections I’ve made through VYPER. They’ve definitely changed my life in a positive way.”

“I’ve learned how to connect with different organizations.”

“I’ve opened up my social circle which is hard for me to do.”

“Before VYPER, I didn’t realize how important it is to be involved in my community.”

“I gained a clear concept of what I want to do in my life and my role in my community.”

“VYPER made me feel like I can make a positive difference in my community.”

“Sometimes it’s astonishing how little youth know about the resources available to them. They learn a lot about them through VYPER.” –VYPER staff

“Youth are learning about agencies and organizations that they didn’t know about before. They have met a lot of adults and built a lot of connections.” –VYPER staff

Health & Well-Being

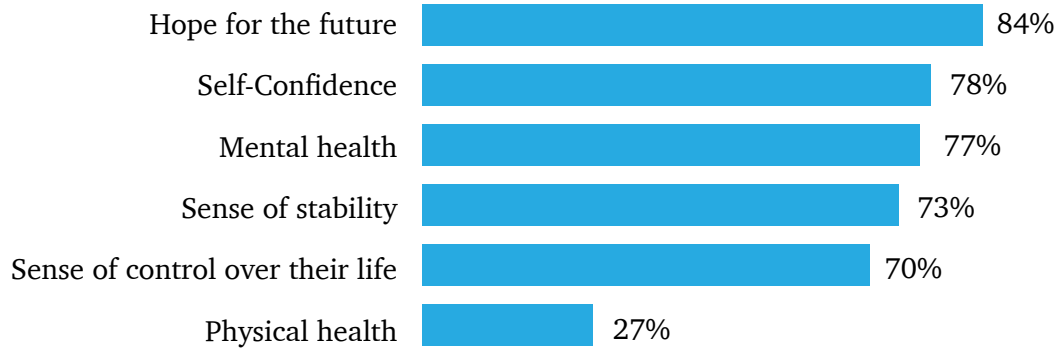
Many focus group participants mentioned they had experienced various mental health challenges, including social anxiety. These youth pointed to their involvement with VYPER as having a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing, including reduced anxiety and greater ease interacting with others in social situations.

Many also said their involvement in VYPER helped them overcome their shyness, gain self-confidence, and find their voice. They explained that feeling heard and valued by adults helped them come to value themselves and to realize they can be agents of change in their community. This realization in turn helped to increase their sense of purpose.

Similarly, grantees and VYPER staff reported improved self-confidence and hopefulness among youth, as well as a greater sense of self-worth, comfort with their identities, and improved skills in emotion regulation (e.g., regulating their anxiety during meetings). In addition, they noted reduced depression, anxiety, and self-harming behaviours among youth.

Data from the survey reflected what participants shared during focus groups and interviews. The majority of survey respondents indicated improved mental health and well-being because of their involvement with VYPER. Also, around a quarter reported improvements in their physical health.

Improved health & well-being because of youth's involvement with VYPER



Note. Youth who reported 'quite a bit' or 'very much' improvement.

In addition, most youth who completed a survey (67%) reported their involvement with VYPER helped to reduce their substance use quite a bit or very much, and half (50%) reported it helped to reduce their illegal activity (among youth for whom these items applied).

Consistent with the survey findings, a number of youth focus group participants identified their involvement with VYPER as the reason they had been able to successfully stop using various substances and to work through their addictions. Staff and adult grantees had also noticed reduced substance use among the VYPER youth they worked with.

Other youth focus group participants described their involvement with VYPER as improving their overall stability, and some said they were no longer homeless as a result.

“Taking part in VYPER has helped very much with my anxiety.”

“VYPER helps me get out of a dark place in life.”

“Participating in VYPER helped me through a tough year.”

“I’ve become confident in my opinions...a lot more confident, not only in group but for the rest of my life.”

“I gain more confidence through VYPER. It’s easier to make friends and get out there and even in home life being able to say what we want and not hold it in.”

“VYPER helps youth grow & gain confidence in their voice & their impact on the community!”

“By being involved with VYPER I have become more comfortable with not only myself but also with other youth and adults.”

“I like the sense of purpose that I experience because of VYPER.”

“My life goals have gotten bigger. I have less doubt in myself. I feel whole.”

“I had someone say they were so excited about these events they didn’t want to go drinking on the weekend.” –Adult grantee

“Youth’s confidence levels have gone up – they can make these phone calls, they can do the presentations and they have a voice that people are listening to. They now have options and feelings of optimism.” –Adult grantee

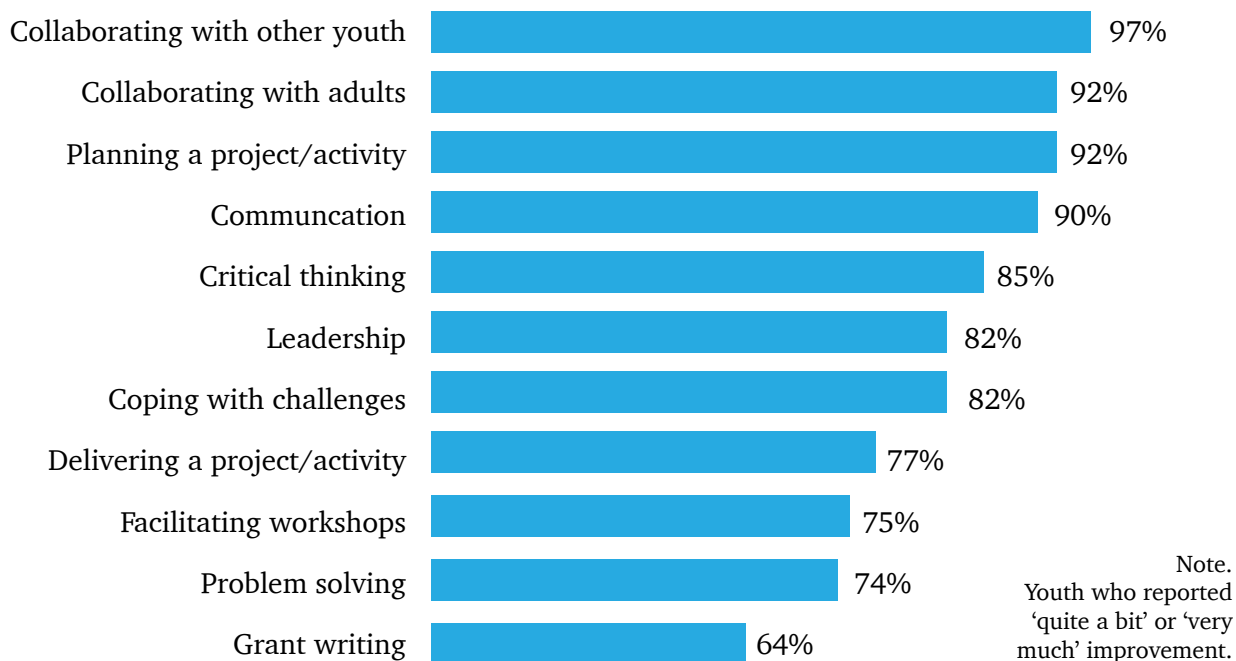
Skills & Knowledge

Youth in all the focus groups discussed learning valuable skills through VYPER, including public speaking, project planning, workshop development, grant writing and reviewing, teamwork, and staying organized. Participants also said they gained communication and leadership skills, and learned how to facilitate fun games and icebreakers. They also learned perspective-taking skills and had a better understanding of others because of their experience with VYPER. In addition, they identified improved skills in working in partnership with adults. Staff and adult grantees echoed youth’s comments and added that the skills youth acquired helped them feel more competent and confident.

The survey findings also indicated improved skills among youth because of their involvement with VYPER. These included skills relating to working on a project (e.g., planning and delivering projects, workshop facilitation, grant writing, collaborating with peers and adults), as well as other transferable skills such as leadership, communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and coping with challenges.

Youth aged 18 or younger were more likely than those aged 19 or older to report improved skills in project planning (100% vs. 79%). There were no other differences.

Skill improvements because of youth’s involvement with VYPER



Eighty-nine percent of survey respondents also reported increased knowledge of youth health because of their involvement with VYPER. In the focus groups, some youth also mentioned they had learned about mental health and suicide awareness, trauma-informed practice, and sexual health through VYPER. Further, youth said the knowledge they gained helped them become more open-minded, understanding, and accepting of diversity.

Youth survey respondents and focus group participants expressed appreciation that their involvement with VYPER helped them gain skills and knowledge which supported their healthy transition to adulthood.

“VYPER has taught me great leadership skills and many other valuable skills necessary to being a healthy successful young adult.”

“VYPER helps me learn new skills, it’s great!”

“My mind has been opened up because of everything I’m learning.”

“I’m learning new techniques and skills to network.”

“I’m learning about youth issues and a lot about how drugs can negatively affect mental health”

“I liked learning what makes a good grant.”

VYPER Staff’s Reflections & Outcomes

Overall, staff described feeling very satisfied with their involvement in VYPER. They liked working as part of a team and the sense of community that developed. They also appreciated learning from the youth and meeting dedicated adults around the region who were motivated to work in partnership with young people.

Staff noted that the outcomes of each VYPER group and project differed depending on the pre-existing resources and relationships VYPER had in a given community. For example, it was easier to start projects, and a greater impact was more likely, in communities where VYPER had pre-existing relationships and contacts, compared to communities where relationships were lacking and needed to be developed. Staff stressed the relational aspect of their work and the significance these relationships had on project outcomes.

Staff spoke positively about how VYPER was innovative and experimental, and valued the perspective that nothing was ever a fail but a learning opportunity.

A number of staff said their views of youth had changed because of their involvement with VYPER. For example, some had greater appreciation of how much young people were capable of accomplishing, as well as greater trust that youth could understand, develop, and implement projects. Staff also felt they gained patience and flexibility working with youth, as well as a better understanding of trauma-informed and harm-reduction approaches.

Many staff also said their practices had changed, such as by actively including youth from the beginning and asking them what they wanted to accomplish and how they wanted to achieve those goals. Other staff members said they had refined their youth engagement strategies and had gained confidence in their skills working with youth.

Further, staff said they gained understanding and skills in how to support youth-adult partnerships. Some added that the skills and strategies needed for youth-adult partnerships were transferable to other types of partnerships, which would help them in their future work.

“To make a safe space, to meet youth where they’re at and to deconstruct in action the labelling around terms like ‘high risk’ and ‘vulnerable’ have had such an impact on me in terms of giving me meaning, understanding allyship, and seeing how possible it all is.” – VYPER staff

“It was such a great project and I was so happy to be part of it. I can say with confidence that it’s changed my life personally and professionally.” –VYPER staff

Additional Feedback

Youth felt their experience with VYPER provided them with many meaningful opportunities which helped them grow and which were also beneficial to put on their résumé to improve their chance of finding employment. Youth and staff felt that for some young people, their involvement with VYPER provided them with a sense of direction and career path, and as a result they felt more hopeful about their future.

Many described VYPER as their family and said that involvement with VYPER helped marginalized youth to stay safe and to remain on a healthy trajectory.

“A lot of youth are kept safe through their involvement with VYPER. It is an immeasurable resource.”

“VYPER helps so many that are lost. It makes us feel like we belong; like family. Being one with no family, VYPER is my life.”

“VYPER has a special place in our hearts and we’d do anything to keep it going. We’re a family, we love each other.”

“VYPER is absolutely amazing and has helped me so much.”

“[Involvement in VYPER] is my life, something I can focus on and I know it’s ok. It guides what I want to do when I’m older. I’m happy because I hope.”

“VYPER opens a lot of doors for youth, gives them a lot more resources and helps them shape what they want to do in the future.” –VYPER staff

PROJECT LESSONS

“To empower youth, [adults] must let go of some power.” –VYPER staff

When youth and adult grantees were asked if they would do anything differently the next time, some said they would not because their project was successful. Others said that having more clarification on everyone’s roles and responsibilities would be helpful in the future. They also realized the importance of taking the time to plan out the details in advance, rather than moving to action too quickly, to ensure the project was successful in achieving the desired goals.

Youth also highlighted the importance of adults gaining an understanding of what young people wanted from the project, and to do so by asking the youth directly. There should also be a supportive adult available for youth to discuss sensitive issues with, and adults should clarify to youth who this adult is.

When asked what their suggestions would be for someone starting a youth-adult partnership, most grantees recognized the importance of listening to the youth and ensuring the project idea is their own and something they want to do. Adult grantees said it was sometimes difficult for youth to express their ideas but felt it was important for adults to give them the space to do so.

In addition, adults stressed the importance of making space for relationship building, both among youth and adults, and among the various young people working on a project (e.g., youth who are thriving and those with more challenges). They said that a project was at risk of derailing if the emphasis was exclusively on action and outcomes, with insufficient focus on process and relationships.

Grantees also said it was important to get the youth and community partners involved as early as possible in the process. In addition, they highlighted the importance of adults having access to individuals with experience in youth-adult partnerships and youth engagement, such as VYPER staff, who could offer guidance and support when needed.

Similarly, VYPER staff learned it was important for VYPER area facilitators to have an ongoing role in providing support to grantees, rather than offering support at the outset and then stepping back. They realized that area facilitators should support the momentum of the project and provide quality control throughout the process. In addition, the role of these facilitators as a “third-party ear” was helpful, as youth sometimes approached them with concerns about the project when they did not feel comfortable discussing them directly with adults in the community. This arrangement supported an iterative feedback mechanism, where youth would relay feedback through the area facilitator who would then work with adults and youth in the community to address the issue and strengthen the youth-adult partnership.

VYPER managers also said that in a project like theirs it was important to have the flexibility to stop working with agencies or communities if VYPER staff experienced resistance or felt unsafe.

In addition, VYPER managers said that in a project like theirs it was important to focus not only on youth advocacy and youth voice but also on youth development which unfolded simultaneously. They explained that developmental issues, and specifically those relating to mental health, intervention and resilience, were key aspects to focus on, and complemented the youth advocacy piece.

Some lessons learned by adult grantees:

“It empowers the youth when they know something adults don’t, and teaches the adults to have more respect for youth and to see they have something to contribute as well.”

“You need to let youth lead. That’s where they learn the skills and have the opportunities to stumble and fall and pick themselves up again – that’s what learning is all about. It’s also really good for adults to learn to take a deep breath and realize it works out.”

“I have learned to be conscious of youth voices, because it doesn’t even cross your mind most times. So I’m conscious now that youth are here in our community, they’re a big part of our community and they’re going to be adults in our community. They’re the ones who are going to lead our community in the future.”

“Listen. Listen to the youth. Adults get caught up on how they can’t do something but with youth they think outside the box, and you should listen to them because they have good and different ideas. Go with it and see what happens. You don’t know if you don’t try.”

EVALUATION PARTICIPANTS' SUGGESTIONS

Overall, evaluation participants were very satisfied with their VYPER experience, and many had no recommendations to improve it. Others had suggestions to build on the project's strengths. The following is a summary of their suggestions.

Youth's Suggestions

"I love VYPER, it has done nothing but good for me. PLEASE DON'T GO AWAY."

- Youth valued the regular area meetings and some wished meetings and activities happened more often. They felt a greater frequency of meetings would provide even more support to young people who needed it.
- Youth liked the community outings and activities that had been organized through VYPER, and some wished there were more. They said that participating in more community activities would help them feel even more engaged and connected to their community.
- Some youth explained that VYPER only had space for meetings but not anywhere for youth to socialize before or after meetings. They felt that having a VYPER headquarters and a place where youth could socialize would be helpful.
- Youth expressed great enthusiasm for working on youth-led projects. Participants in some groups felt they spent time discussing project ideas but did not have the opportunity to plan a project, and felt this opportunity would have been beneficial to them and their community.
- Some participants felt that VYPER activities and projects should be more directly focused on health initiatives, and particularly improving youth health.
- Some youth felt that more staff were needed during meetings. Specifically, if youth with higher needs required individualized support during meetings, it would be helpful if a staff member was available to provide that support while other staff focused on the rest of the group.
- Some youth felt the pace of project planning was too slow. They suggested more continuity across meetings (e.g., not discussing the same issues at every meeting), and follow-through to turn project ideas into action.
- Many youth felt there should be more promotion of VYPER so that more young people were aware of it and took part. Suggestions included recruiting more young people through schools and community centres.
- Youth felt that VYPER should receive more funding so that it could be maintained and benefit more young people.

Staff and other Adults' Suggestions

- Hire more staff who are trained as counsellors to ensure that vulnerable youth receive appropriate support from VYPER. In addition, youth would benefit from more one-on-one support from staff, such as to help them connect to needed community services.
- If VYPER had the capacity, more time should be devoted to engaging the most isolated and disenfranchised youth, such as homeless youth and those in government care.
- Staff appreciated the flexibility inherent in VYPER which allowed for change to occur, although a few wished there had been more structure. They felt that more structure would have helped them better understand the direction the project was heading.
- Some staff, as well as youth, felt that because youth did not have specified roles and responsibilities and could disengage from the project whenever they chose, a small core group of young people did the majority of the work. A suggestion was for youth to have roles on projects so they felt a greater sense of accountability.
- Staff acknowledged the importance of documentation and note-taking. However, at times they were unsure what the purpose was, and would have appreciated more structure around documentation.
- Some VYPER staff felt there was a lag in information-sharing among themselves, because they did not work out of a single office. For example, there might be a change in practice which not all staff were informed about until weeks later. They valued the opportunities they did receive to work together as a team, and suggested having more of these opportunities and improved communication among staff members.
- For system change to occur, there should be more and longer-term support (i.e., beyond three years) from the community and provincial and municipal government to promote youth-adult partnerships.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

The mixed-method evaluation approach, which incorporated qualitative and quantitative data, was an effective way of measuring outcomes as well as youth's and adults' experiences throughout the process.

Evaluation results suggested that VYPER staff worked in a way that was consistent with the evidence-based youth engagement strategies that were highlighted in the literature review. Findings showed that most youth felt their experience with VYPER was personally meaningful and they attributed their involvement with VYPER to increasing their meaningful engagement in community activities. They felt heard and valued by adults and other young people; experienced a sense of belonging; and felt they were contributing to positive change in their community. Despite challenges that many of the young people faced with mental health and substance use, they felt engaged in VYPER and their youth-adult partnership projects.

Most young people felt that youth and adults worked well together on VYPER projects, that they worked together as partners, and they helped one another develop new skills. Similarly, adult grantees generally felt that youth and adults were successful at working collaboratively, despite some challenges.

Young people's positive experiences interacting with adults, and feeling heard and validated, helped many youth to reduce their anxiety about approaching adults for support and guidance. The process of relationship-building among youth and adults, as well as among youth and their peers, was seen as a critical component to VYPER's success. Participants attributed relationship-building to successful outcomes in areas beyond youth-adult partnerships, including improved mental health, improved skills and confidence in social interactions, and reduced sense of isolation among youth.

Further, most youth who completed a survey reported that their involvement with VYPER helped to lower their substance use, and a number of youth focus group participants identified their involvement with VYPER as the reason they had been able to successfully stop using various substances and to work through their addictions. Staff and adult grantees had also noticed reduced substance use among the VYPER youth they worked with. In addition, youth reported reductions in their illegal activity and other risk situations, including homelessness, because of their involvement with VYPER.

Youth also reported greater connections, opportunities, and involvement in the community, and a larger support network. In addition, they credited their involvement with VYPER to improved knowledge of community services and a greater openness to accessing these services.

Youth and adults said that young people's experience with VYPER helped to improve their knowledge of youth health and other youth issues, and their skills in many areas. Youth's development of skills and knowledge helped them feel more competent and confident, not only in their VYPER work but also in reaching their longer-term goals.

Evaluation findings also indicated that adult allies gained an increased understanding of effective youth engagement strategies and how to implement them; developed greater capacity and motivation to engage with youth in future program planning; and developed a greater reliance on youth voice in their work. There were also increased or enhanced youth-adult partnerships within the participating agencies, and some noted increases within the larger community. In addition, evaluation participants felt that VYPER supported a knowledge-exchange mechanism for communities to share promising practices for meaningful youth engagement and youth-adult collaborations.

Findings demonstrated that VYPER was successful at meeting the project's expected outcomes. Evaluation participants were very satisfied with their VYPER experience. They also offered suggestions to build on the project's strengths, including the need for longer-term funding for systemic change to occur.

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APPENDIX: Youth-Adult Partnership Grant Descriptions

The following are descriptions of the visions and missions of the Youth-Adult partnership grants that were awarded through VYPER:

Abbotsford Youth Committee

Vision: An Abbotsford where local youth have strong relationships with each other and with local youth organizations – and are working together toward better health for Abbotsford’s youth.

Mission: Bringing together youth and youth agencies to identify what is needed to support the development and sustainability of a local group of youth who can guide, inspire and connect service providers, the community and the next generation of Abbotsford youth.

Agassiz Community Services

Vision: A community that is inclusive, safe, supportive and fun for youth in the District of Kent (Agassiz) and Harrison Hot Springs.

Mission: Creating opportunities for youth voices to be heard, guide services and engage in development and implementation of youth programming.

Alexandra Neighbourhood House

Vision: An accepting, safe, and sober space for youth to have fun, escape their worries, and express themselves in a positive way.

Mission: Increasing organization, building skills, maximizing talent, and generating more consistency in the South Surrey/White Rock Youth Collective in order to make change in our community.

Bakerview Centre for Learning

Vision: To create and provide programs, resources, facilities and services to our student community to help improve their quality of life.

Mission: All things created through the collective effort of the committee and its partners to meet the wants and needs of our student community.

BC Responsible & Problem Gambling

Vision: A Fraser Valley where youth and young adults are becoming more aware of healthy lifestyle choices and how to integrate those choices into a balanced and happy life.

Mission: To engage youth in peer to peer presentations in schools and community groups from Surrey to Hope on how to maintain balance in our lives.

Chilliwack Senior Peer Counsellors

Vision: A community where there are intergenerational connections that bridge the years to foster bonds between seniors and youth so they may learn from one another.

Mission: Creating valuable relationships between youth and seniors through interactive activities and events.

Chilliwack VOYCE

Vision: To create a society where youth and young adults are given opportunities to reach their full potential and be valued as meaningful contributors.

Mission: To create a dialogue in the community of Chilliwack around youth strengths, abilities, needs, and wants, in hopes of guiding adults and society toward enlightenment about youth situations and toward equalizing youth voice.

Community for Hepatitis-C Empowerment and Prevention (CHEP)

Vision: A Fraser Valley peer-to-peer education team that has knowledge, skills and opportunities to share information around reducing harms and Hepatitis-C risk in school, clinics, and other community settings.

Mission: Youth and young adult peer facilitators creating opportunities for open informed dialogues on reducing harms and Hepatitis-C risk in their Fraser Valley communities.

Encompass Support Services Society

Vision: We envision a version of Langley where LGBTQ+ youth are not afraid to express themselves, and are able to share the struggles they face without backlash or ridicule.

Mission: To share resources and create a safer space for LGBTQ+ youth where there otherwise is none.

Hope Homework Club

Vision: Every high school student in Hope has a place that they feel comfortable to go to for help with homework, after school.

Mission: To provide an environment that is friendly and comfortable for students to come and receive homework help without judgement, bullying or being made feel stupid.

Inspiring, Guiding and Connecting Impact

Vision: Youth Substance Use Services where youth and young adults can voice how to help other youth connect in their communities.

Mission: Creating opportunities for youth to feel welcome and comfortable in a safe space where they can collaborate and voice opinions on how youth substance use services can help youth connect in their community.

Maple Ridge/Pitt Meadows Parks and Leisure Services, City of Maple Ridge

Vision: A community where there is a common understanding of the rights and responsibilities of youth and where youth development and growth is seen as dynamic and youth are engaged to provide meaningful input to inform decisions affecting them.

Mission: To create a Youth Strategy which will provide recommendations and tools to influence practice, enhance support and improve working partnerships between youth and emerging adults and service providers and create pathways to ensure youth are seen as partners in their own future.

Mission Community Services Society

Vision: A Fraser East community that acknowledges that wellness relies on quality relationships.

Mission: Diverse youth and adults co-facilitating awareness about, access to, and exploration of Indigenous wisdom to support growth, sharing, self-evaluation, and connection among individuals and in the community.

Mission Youth Committee

Vision: A podium for youth all over to speak and be heard on issues regarding youth. Youth involvement in projects related to youth in Mission. A utopian society with no discrimination of any sort.

Mission: To bring youth involvement to Mission through working with our partners to engage youth in community Projects.

Pacific Community Resources Society

Vision: A Withdrawal Management Program (Creekside) where the voice and expertise of youth in recovery help youth who are struggling (with substance use issues) by informing practice, sharing experiences, and facilitating healthy connections to services and supports in their community.

Mission: Youth supporting youth to move from actively struggling with substance use to having healthy connections with supports and services in their community.

Queer the Way

Vision: The Ministry of Children and Family Development providing social work, counselling, and probation services that are inclusive and welcoming to queer children and youth.

Mission: Through the sharing of personal stories, youth presenters will demonstrate some of the unique needs and how to better serve queer children and youth.

Spirit of the Children Society

Vision: A Fraser North and South community that acknowledges that wellness relies on quality relationships.

Mission: Diverse youth and adults co-facilitating awareness about, access to, and exploration of Indigenous wisdom to support growth, sharing, self-evaluation, and connection among individuals and in the community.

Surrey Youth Voice

Vision: A Surrey where adults support youth voices to inspire and empower a safer, healthier community for all.

Mission: Creating opportunities and networks to connect youth with each other, adults, and resources to foster respect and belonging in their community.

Tri-Cities Youth for Youth

Vision: A Tri-Cities where youth support other youth to feel empowered to make healthy and informed choices through the sharing of knowledge about mental health and substance misuse, while simultaneously de-stigmatizing and breaking down stereotypes about substance use and mental health problems.

Mission: Developing workshops and sharing resources to support youth and young adults in the Tri-Cities in making healthy and informed decisions. Training youth facilitators to create safe spaces for open dialogue primarily around substance use/misuse and mental health.

Youth Rekindling Boston Bar

Vision: A team of inspired and energized youth that confidently tackle the challenges of today's ever-changing world and build a sense of community and belonging in Boston Bar – rekindling the pioneering spirit of the adventurers who built our town.

Mission: Balancing our respect for traditions with curiosity and desire for a bright future by gaining experience and knowledge out of town and bringing it back to create an energy and vitality to help our community survive.

