A Vibrant Community-University Partnership on Youth Mental Health

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Learning Objectives

- This poster highlights the challenges and adaptations to implement a Community-University Partnership Project on Youth Mental Health during the COVID-19 pandemic between March 2020 to February 2023 in Alberta, Canada.
- We highlight the success of this community-university partnership, the values of empowerment, personal development, and capacity building through participation and collaboration.

Background and Main Issues

- Despite the large number of young persons who are struggling with mental health issues, treatment programs are not always accessible, relevant, or effective (Malla et al., 2018; Ruff & Harrison, 2020).
- In Canada, an estimated one in five children experience mental health challenges, yet less than 20 per cent will receive treatment (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2018).
- Challenges for children and youth have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic; for instance, the prevalence of depression and anxiety symptoms had doubled, compared with pre-pandemic estimates (Racine et al., 2021).
- In Canada, youth ages 15 to 24 reported the lowest self-perceived mental health compared with all other age groups; their ratings of excellent or very good mental health were 42% during the early stages of the pandemic, compared to 62% in 2018 (Statistics Canada, 2021).
- Youth are going through transition from adolescence to young adulthood. From an **ecological system perspective** (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 1998), the interactions and influences of familial, contextual, structural, economic, and ethnic factors have direct and indirect implications for youth mental health during this period of transition.
- Given all the considerations and negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth have highlighted the need to find innovative ways to target and address mental health from a collaborative approach with youth, parents/guardians, service providers, policy makers, and researchers.

"The Project provided links to the broader community of practitioners and bridges between practice and research."
(Jamie, Community Partner)

Theoretical Approaches

Three theoretical approaches were used to guide this project:
1) **Participatory Action Research** (Oosterbroek et al., 2021; Shneider, 2012), which aims at actively engaging participants throughout the process to address issues for change.
2) **Partnership Engagement Model** (Schaffer et al., 2017), which is aimed to engage stakeholders, foster commitment, build collaboration, and develop sustainable partnership for best practices and educating students.
3) **Pathways to Participation Framework** (Shier, 2001), which suggests five levels of participation for children and youth, and encourages researchers or community organizers to consider implementing an action plan that could enhance participation of children and youth, and meaningfully engage children and youth in the decision-making process.

Achievements and Values of this Project

- 13 formal partners that include non-profit organizations, governmental organizations, and educational institutions
- 8 supporting partners, of which six are from the business sector, and two are educational institutions
- 41 project assistants, practicum students, interns, or volunteers have been involved from diverse disciplines that consist of social work, psychology, software engineering, computer science, etc.
- 6 photo story and 4 web app co-creation groups were facilitated
- 3 community forums on Voices of Youth Mental Health to be held in June 2023
- 4 peer-reviewed conference presentations that involved non-academic partners and project assistants were delivered

Challenges and Adaptation of this Community-University Partnership Project

Challenges
- When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Canada in March 2020, all in-person project activities were put on pause as we awaited public health guidance. However, the continued pandemic led to social distancing restrictions, work from home, and online learning, as well as sicknesses and even deaths as result of the pandemic.
- Many small non-profit organizations were not adequately equipped with online service delivery infrastructures and staff were stretched to their limits; and individuals and families were stressed.

Adaptations
- Ongoing consultations was sought from our Advisory Committee, which consists of youth, parents, service providers, government officials, and university researchers. With their guidance, the project team modified all in-person project activities to online delivery.
- However, online fatigue and lack of social connection among youth were two of the major concerns reported by parents and service providers. As such, the project team responded by reverting the project activities back to in-person and to be implemented when there's no social distancing restrictions.
- The project also expanded beyond email communications to the use of different social media channels (e.g., Instagram and Twitter to reach out to youth, and Facebook to connect with parents). We also used paid ads through Facebook to promote the project.
- Due to unexpected termination of some social service programs or shortage of staff, some non-profit organizations were not able to provide fieldwork placements to professional program students. Our project offered flexibility and a variety of project activities. We successfully supervised ten university students at undergraduate and graduate levels field placements in the first 2.5 years of the project.

"I play a role on this project as a (Youth) Advisory Committee Member and as a Project Assistant, where I represent the students and (youth) volunteers…The youth felt that their voices were heard and I could see their confidence improve with the support of their peers. This confidence and engagement inspired me, as a student, to pursue a career in helping youth." (Julia)

"Living in Grande Prairie Alberta, our community is often forgotten about when it comes to the voices of our people. We are considered rural and those who live in the county and other areas around our area are often left behind more so…I see the benefits of this project not only assisting individuals but bringing the community together to create greater change in the form of better understanding our needs." (Shauna, Agency Partner)