

Research in Practice Projects

Walking Alongside: Youth-Adult Partnerships in Making Change

Melanie Sondergaard



RiPAL-BC

Research in Practice in Adult Literacy
British Columbia

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Walking Alongside: Youth-Adult Partnerships in Making Change is one in a series of reports resulting from Research in Practice Projects (RiPP), a RiPAL-BC project. RiPAL-BC is a grass roots network of individuals and organizations committed to research in practice in adult literacy in British Columbia, Canada.

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Additional copies of this document can be downloaded from <http://ripal.literacy.bc.ca>

RiPAL-BC
C/O 601-510 West Hastings Street
Vancouver, BC V6B 1L8
Ph: 604-684-0624 / Fax: 604-684-8520
Email: RiPAL@literacy.bc.ca

<http://ripal.literacy.bc.ca>

Preface

Research-in-Practice Projects (RiPP) started as a way to encourage and support practitioners to engage in research about their practice. College and community practitioners were eager to participate in research activities but seldom had the required resources and energy to write a research proposal for a small individual project. Practitioners explained that their “proposal-writing” energy gets directed to program delivery proposals. RiPP offered an alternative. Building on previous research-in-practice projects carried out in Alberta by The RiPAL Network, RiPP involved five literacy practitioners in research-in-practice projects and provided them with research education opportunities and support.

In the fall of 2003, literacy program coordinators, instructors and others involved in literacy practice were invited to participate in a facilitated meeting to explore possible research topics they might be interested in pursuing. During the following weeks, those who were interested in continuing with the project developed individual research proposals. Throughout the next eighteen months, five practitioners collected data, analysed it and wrote their findings. The group came together several times to discuss the research stages they were navigating and the challenges they were facing. Online discussions allowed the group to stay in touch and maintain the level of support required to make progress in their individual projects.

The process was not without challenges. Writing, especially, became an almost insurmountable hurdle that was hard to make space for in busy professional and personal lives. Practitioner researchers worked for many months; dedicating many more hours than the project had anticipated, to produce research reports that would be rigorous but also speak clearly to the audience they care about most, other practitioners and community members.

In this report, Melanie Sondergaard looks at the challenges faced by an adult working to promote active youth citizenship. Melanie’s project focuses on how an adult can support marginalized youth to make change in their community. She argues that adults need to foster and sustain a learning process where youth can experience and explore what it takes to be a change agent.

Marina Niks
RiPP Coordinator
ripal@literacy.bc.ca

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Introduction

"We ask for your help because we cannot do this by ourselves. We all have to work together on this. You have the experience and we have the fresh ideas.... I ask you all here right now to look back when you were all teens and ask yourself this, how many people tried to help you out? ...We are not here to put down the band office, or anyone else, but we have watched our friends and family turn to drugs and alcohol. Not anymore. We are here to make a difference in our town even if it is a small one at first. But with the help of you all here, we are not going to give up"
(Excerpt from Youth participants' final presentation to invited adults, May 19, 2004).

"Walking Alongside" was designed to explore how youth and adults can work together to make change in community. It grew out of my work as an adult practitioner supporting youth engagement in Hazelton, and my questions of how best to fill this role.

Project Context

The Upper Skeena, where I live and work, has a population of around 6,600, 60% of which are 28 years old and under (Gitxsan Government Commission, 1999). Young adults trying to finish school, find work, and carve out a future here face many challenging barriers. The average age of social assistance recipients in the area is 23 and the majority of these recipients have little or no work experience at all. Eighty-seven percent of these same recipients have a grade 9 education or less (Breaking barriers: A model for a literate citizenship, 1998).

As a small, northern, resource-based community, the Upper Skeena has seen many cyclical downturns in the economy over the past several years, leaving high unemployment and a seeming lack of local control. Past literacy research in our community has shown how these dire social and economic conditions have left citizens with a sense of powerlessness. According to Val Napoleon (1998), many young people who have not found success in school are entering adulthood without the ability to imagine a future, to see and feel a personal connection to the imagined future, or to accept responsibility for action on future plans.

As an animator and a facilitator with youth and through my work at Storytellers' Foundation (see Appendix), I seek to foster literacy among young adults and to promote an active youth citizenship. I support young citizens as they explore issues of concern to them and as they take on meaningful projects in the community.

As an educator, I see the process of supporting a young person to make change as valuable “learning for life.” As they engage with real issues, young adults have a chance to practically learn about taking control of their lives and shaping their own future. To break the cycle of powerlessness in our community, young adults need opportunities to try their hand at being change agents. By taking on projects that are meaningful to them, youth are not only shaping our community but are also learning the skills to make change for themselves. As a community, I believe we need to figure out how to create more of these learning opportunities.

Research Project

There is a willingness and desire from adults and local organizations to provide opportunities for youth engagement.

Other practitioners in Hazelton also see the benefits of youth taking on leadership roles both for youth themselves and for our community. They see how youth in leadership positions build personal agency and skills for life. They’ve spoken about how we all benefit when young voices are brought to the table and when young ideas and energy contribute to building our community. Many organizations have hired youth workers and supported the development of youth councils. Some want to support young people to take on active roles in the community, to sit on boards, to have opportunities to have a voice and make decisions, but struggle with how best to support this type of leadership in a way that is authentic and not simply tokenism.

Supporting youth means more than offering administrative, organizational and monetary resources and advice. It means more than just providing an opportunity to be involved in or to make change in the community. From my experience, supporting youth means walking alongside young adults as they make change. It means learning together. It means taking the time to really listen. It means being willing to push and nudge young adults out of their comfort zones and being willing to question and be pushed ourselves.

There is so much potential for adult/youth partnerships to be both empowering or disempowering for those involved, depending on how they are approached. I have found the experience of working with teams of youth to be rewarding and hopeful, as well as challenging and humbling. These relationships have taught me so much as I have worked alongside younger community builders with unique perspectives. For this project, I wanted to explore what support adults can offer

to youth as they step up or speak out.

I wanted to work with a group of youth as they took on a meaningful project trying to make change in their community, and then to track what went on for both the youth team and for the facilitator. I wanted to work with a group of learners who were struggling to find success within the school system. For this project then, I started with the research question *how can an adult support marginalized youth to make change in their community?*

In carrying out the research, I have had a chance to step back from my practice as an outsider looking in, and to consider what elements are crucial in youth/adult partnerships. I have found that an adult who wants to support youth to make change needs to foster and sustain a learning process where youth can experience and explore what it takes to be a change agent.

As youth work to make change in their community there are many opportunities for growth and learning for life about what it takes to make change. The adult supporting this process needs to see the opportunities for learning along the way and provide space for conversation and reflection to highlight the learning. In our project, there were natural opportunities for the youth team to explore and experience what it took to be a change agent as they assessed the risks they were willing to take along the way, and as they were pushed to new levels of responsibility in their thinking, attitudes and actions as they moved through the process. This project has reminded me how important it is for adults to approach supportive relationships with youth with the intention of fostering learning.

Drawing on the Literature and Other Inspiring Sources . . .

Approaching the Literature

For this project, I was not sure how best to approach, use and incorporate literature. From the beginning, I delved into practice (planning, organizing and facilitating the group project piece) which I intended to track for my research. As a practitioner, this was the most comfortable place for me to start, and it was a struggle for me to begin seeing myself as a researcher. As I began to analyze my data and to make sense of my findings, however, the process forced me to name and pull together a couple of key local sources that have shaped my thinking around this topic over the past couple of years.

During the analysis phase, I also took a self-directed course for university credit looking at “Youth-Adult Partnerships in Community Development.” I shaped the course with this content hoping to get a scan of what was being written by academics and other practitioners on the topic. Although in no way an exhaustive search of the literature, the course readings pushed me to step away from my data with a more critical eye and helped me to situate my project findings outside my own practice. In this section I draw from these two sources to frame the project.

Local Research on Literacy

In 1998, a couple of important research projects were conducted in Hazelton, looking at young adults and literacy. *To Live a Good Life: Perspectives on High School Education (Napolean)* and *Breaking Barriers: A Model for a Literate Citizenship* were key documents that have shaped both the work at the Learning Shop (see Appendix) and my own practice working with young adults in Hazelton. I have referred to the findings from both reports and their importance for this project in my introduction.

In short, these reports outline salient factors in the social and economic history of the Upper Skeena and describe how this history has affected student success or lack of success in the local education system. *Breaking Barriers* outlines a model for empowering literacy education that places community at the centre of the curriculum. The report argues that to learn the skills for literacy and citizenship, learners must have opportunities to be actively engaged in community life.

Youth Literacy Action Research

In 2001, a team of youth in the Learning Shop conducted an action research project looking at the learning environments that foster literacy and personal agency in young people. As one of the Learning Shop staff that supported this team, their findings and questions have had a profound impact on my practice with other youth.

A key finding from the team’s research was that a relationship with a significant, caring adult is crucial for young learners. In their research, the team identified six key learning environments where youth agency and literacy are fostered. The environments include: family, extended family, the community, school, work, and peer/dating relationships.

The team said youth could always tell when they were being “fixed” by adults. They described nurturing relationships with adults as: dynamic (meaning that adults were aware they were learning from youth as much as they were teaching), caring, and ‘two-way’ (meaning the adults saw youth as capable and worthy).

Youth Engagement in the Literature Surveyed

There have been some key shifts in practitioner approaches to working with marginalized youth in the past 40 years. Karen Pittman (2002), Josephine Ho (2003) and Checkoway, Richards-Schuster, Abdullah, Aragon, Facio, Figueroa, Reddy, Welsh, & White (2003) all describe how youth practice and policy has shifted during this time from using “deficits” language and approaches to using the concept of “assets.” Over four decades, youth have gone from being seen as “problems needing to be fixed” to being “community builders with important contributions to make.” Youth practice in Canada and the USA has shifted to increasingly promote and support youth engagement and youth participation as a model for youth development.

Much has been written about the benefits to youth as they are supported to engage meaningfully in their communities. The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement names several benefits, including: youth empowerment; a sense of being valued; an increased sense of competence; enhanced personal and job skills; a sense of social responsibility; reduced drug use, teen pregnancy and aggression; and increased self esteem (CEYE, 2002). As Pittman (2002) notes: “Young people do not grow up in programs, but in communities. And the

argument that meaningful participation is critical to youth development has been well documented” (p. 20).

Youth-Adult Partnerships

In the sources I surveyed, “youth-adult partnerships” was the term used to describe adult support to youth engagement. The concept of strong, respectful youth-adult partnerships (Y-APs) is well received, but there is ongoing questioning about how best to approach and implement these partnerships in practice. I found little describing the necessary characteristics or elements of successful Y-APs.

One very useful article that I found, however, does explore some of the common pitfalls in youth-adult partnerships. Linda Camino (2005) explains that Y-APs are talked about a great deal in the literature but are poorly understood and carried out in practice. Camino describes three key pitfalls faced by practitioners trying to work with youth in this way. One is that youth are limited in their skill set and cannot do it all. Camino explains that adults often enter Y-APs believing that youth should do everything of importance. From her experience, the result has been that youth become overwhelmed, discouraged and ultimately feel incapable, not empowered. A second pitfall she describes is the belief that adults need to just get out of the way. In these instances, Camino says adults are “weakened in their potential to nurture youth confidence and competence” (p. 78). When adults step aside completely, adult skills and experience are not drawn on in the relationship. The last pitfall described in the article is when Y-APs become solely focussed on youth development. From her experience, Camino shows how adults supporting youth also require room for growth, learning and development. By focusing solely on youth development, adults also miss the valuable energy and contributions that youth bring to the relationships.

In light of these pitfalls and other challenges, several authors call for organizational buy-in for strong, effective youth-adult partnerships. Without an organizational structure to promote Y-APs, these authors see little potential for youth and adults to work together in this way. For example, Zeldin, Camino and Mook (2005) describe institutional barriers to Y-APs. They explain that, although there have been shifts in current youth work, the dominant public assumption still seems to be “that adolescence is a time of storm and stress, and that youth are therefore in need of protection and control from their communities” (p. 122). In their opinion, public policy and organizational change will be necessary to shift thinking and practice around Y-APs in the years to come.

Overall, the authors I read talk about the need for adults to work “with” youth and not for youth. Approaching a youth-adult partnership means there must be a mutual recognition and valuing of the life experience, ideas, and creativity each holds. While supporting youth to make change, adults must be comfortable with not always being in control. They must learn to share power, and they must be comfortable not always agreeing with the direction a project takes. At the same time, the authors also talk about the importance of adults contributing their expertise, ideas and feedback when needed. For an adult trying to support youth in this way, it means juggling multiple roles of leading and being led, of taking and giving direction, and of knowing when to step in and when to step back.

Methods

I chose to engage in action research; I carried out a project and documented, reflected and wrote about it. The action aspect of the research consisted of supporting a youth team to take on a community project. As with other projects at the Learning Shop, I followed the “integrating approach cycle” (see Appendix) by providing a space for the team to get to know each other, develop trust, explore their own interests, connecting these to a need, gap or opportunity in the community and then supporting the team to take an action of some kind.

As the timeframe for the project was short (eight weeks/ two hours a week), I decided to keep the framework quite tight. The eight sessions were designed to move the group from discussion to action using action research as a tool. The question the team explored was “What community conditions surrounding young adults are necessary to foster literacy?” Although there was flexibility to take the project wherever the group wanted it to go, the format of the eight sessions involved:

- Group members individually reflecting on personal experiences, through a personal mapping exercise, and sharing key parts with the research team;
- Exploring conditions surrounding young people in Hazelton, by building a group map;
- Identifying common themes on the map;
- Researching the themes discovered through interviews with community members;
- Reflecting on the experience through weekly journal questions and group discussions;
- Sharing the findings from the research with a group of community leaders using the group map.

Participants

At the Learning Shop we work with a variety of groups. Project opportunities and partnerships emerge on an ongoing basis from different relationships that we have with organizations or individuals in the community. This means that the groups of youth that we have worked with have taken many different shapes. They may come from classes in the schools, groups who are supported by other organizations, or just pockets of youth with common interests.

For this project I chose to work with a group of learners who were struggling to find success. By “marginalized learners” I mean those who are not fully engaged in formal and informal learning. It takes time to build trust and rapport with students, and as the project timeline was so short, I decided to work with learners

that I already had a relationship with. I also wanted to work with a group that had the most probability of staying with and finishing the project, and, furthermore, a team that was able to engage in conversations and reflections.

As we are frequently asked to facilitate experiential education workshops and sessions with students at a local alternate high school, I was able to approach the classes to select a group. From previous, recent work that I had facilitated with these students, I selected learners who had attended classes regularly, handed written assignments back to me, and were mostly engaged in the course material.

At the outset, I started with a team of seven youth (ages 17-20), four young women and three young men. Each of the group members was trying to take control of their lives, and working at completing their graduation courses after having recently gone back to school. Some had returned to school after having been asked to leave, others were returning after choosing to leave school. All were working on grade 10 Math and English courses, as well as a Career and Personal Planning credit.

After selecting the team, I approached group members individually, explained the project and invited them to join. Group members were given credit for completed work experience hours for their participation in the project.

When we met for the first time, group members explained that they had chosen to join the project because they had seen and experienced the harmful effects of drugs and alcohol, the high drop-out rates and the destructive cycle of many of their peers. They decided to join the team because they wanted to see something shift in their community and wanted to make change happen for themselves and for other young people.

The project team started with seven group members, but due to a number of reasons, only two completed the project work. One group member was absent from school for a long time and lost interest in the project, one other left school and moved away to stay with family in Terrace, and three others left the project due to ongoing conflict with other group members.

Group Project

For the duration of the project, the youth team met with me at the Learning Shop once a week on Friday afternoons to plan, discuss, organize and troubleshoot. In

the initial session, team members started by creating a wall map of the realities and conditions around local youth. From the mapping exercise they identified high drug and alcohol use among their peers as the issue they wanted to address for their project. In their analysis, they agreed that these unhealthy behaviours stemmed from a lack of healthier options and activities in town. To confirm this theory, the youth team surveyed the local band offices, youth drop-in centres and social services to prove how little was available in the community for youth. To their surprise, there were far more activities organized each week than they were aware of.

As the team began to see how much was really going on in town, their analysis went deeper. They began to question why people were not attending the events, why adults were doing all of the planning for them, why so many things were going on and still their peers were stuck in a cycle of unhealthy behaviours on the weekends. From the discussions came the idea of asking for a youth council at the school, where young people would be supported to organize the events themselves. They hoped that by having activities run by youth for youth, there would be more participation. They also hoped that running a council would help more young people gain leadership skills and start making changes in their lives.

The team decided, for their final presentation, to present their map and analysis to the staff at their school. To make their case, team members hosted a focus group at their school to raise interest with their peers and to get support for the idea. Over 35 students showed up at the focus group, and 16 volunteered to help with the council. The youth team also created a short video outside of our project meetings (with the help of staff at the school) that told their story, and gave their reasons for wanting support for the council. On the final day of the project, the team presented their video to the staff. The staff supported the idea immediately, and agreed to start a council in the following school year.

Researcher's Hat

The research aspect of my project involved tracking both the experiences and reflections of the group as well as my own observations and reflections as the facilitator. Three data collection methods were used: recorded group discussions, weekly written journals and reflections at the end of each session from each of the team members, and a detailed facilitator's journal. Unfortunately, the data that I was able to collect was limited by a few different factors.

Group Discussions

To capture the group's ongoing experiences, ideas and reflections, I ended each session with a guided discussion. Each week I prepared a series of reflective questions and facilitated a short group discussion. I had hoped to tape record these; however, the first session was quite awkward and the group members stopped talking as soon as the recorder was turned on. I chose instead to turn off the tape during the rest of the sessions and to take notes of the group's responses.

Collecting data in this way, however, had its own problems. As I recorded these discussions, I missed much of the detail of what was said (by sketching things in point form while facilitating the discussion itself). Inevitably I also would have recorded the responses with my own interpretation and bias. As such, I have very few of these reflections to refer to and they are perhaps of limited value to capture the group's own perspective. Acknowledging their limitations, however, I have used the recorded reflections as data because I think they offer some insight into the group's overall sentiment and the mood of our meetings together.

Over the course of the project, the group became more and more comfortable with reflecting. Where the discussions were awkward and halting at the beginning of the project with long pauses and silences, they were gradually more comfortable and insightful for the group.

Team Journals

I also planned to collect weekly written reflections from the group members. My plan was to provide weekly reflective questions and to collect the responses as participants finished them. Unfortunately, I only have completed reflections from our first session together as the group discussed their hopes and expectations for the project. After that only one participant completed the reflections—and this was only once. The group struggled with the journals and said they felt "like homework." At one session I asked the group to fill out the journals before they left. The responses were filled out without much thought, were mostly one-worded or said "I don't know." I stressed the importance of the journals for helping them to capture their learning along the way, but finally opted to end the use of written reflections and encourage reflection through discussion.

Facilitator's Journal

My third data collection method was an ongoing facilitator's journal. For this data source I took time, within one day of each session, to make detailed notes of my observations and reflections. I also made entries whenever I had interactions with group members outside of the eight sessions. As I made these entries I was careful to record who was there, what I observed in terms of behaviour,

interactions, what took place and my own questions and reflections as a facilitator along the way.

Due to the problems with the other two data sources, these journals ended up being the main data source for my research. This has meant that I have more information about the facilitator's experience, and that my data about the participants' experience is mostly from my own perspective. This shifted my research question considerably, as I had originally wanted to track what happened for the youth team, and ended up focussing more on my perspective as an adult supporting youth.

Data Analysis

As most of my data came from my own journals, analysis was a particularly tricky task. It involved stepping back from my facilitator's journal and looking at my own writings through the lens of a researcher. To begin my analysis, I had to untangle these two roles (of facilitator and researcher) and begin by asking questions of myself such as: What did I do as the facilitator with this group of youth? What happened for me as the facilitator? What happened for the group? What worked? What did not work? As I began to read the data with these questions in mind, themes began to emerge.

Moving beyond this stage of initial description and coding was another challenging phase in the project. In our practitioner research meetings (RiPP) our research friend Marina Niks talked about the importance of "climbing the conceptual ladder" and moving our findings from description to interpretation and then to more abstract ideas and arguments. To begin climbing, I had to step away from the data and start to scan the literature that I had collected looking at youth-adult partnerships. As I began to read what others had written about supporting youth, I asked myself, what have I learned from my own project? What do I know now that I did not know before? From this process, I went back to the themes I had coded, and was able to begin building my argument and analysis.

Juggling Practitioner and Researcher Hats

To carry out the research project, I donned two hats, that of a facilitator and that of a researcher. In my facilitator role, I worked with a group of youth over an

eight-week period supporting them as they took on a project to make change in their school community. In my researcher role, I carefully tracked and recorded my observations and thoughts during the project, then stepped back and tried to analyze what I saw taking place for the facilitator and the participants. Juggling these two hats was a challenge, as I am much more comfortable in the role of facilitating young adults than in the role of observing and analyzing this process.

I have pieced together my role as a facilitator over the years by watching educators I admire, by trying my hand at different approaches, by listening to learners and by reflecting on my experiences to draw out my own learning. I have worked as a facilitator with youth for the past six years, mainly with Storytellers Foundation in Hazelton where I now coordinate an informal education centre called the Learning Shop.

Being a researcher was new to me. Being a part of our Research in Practice Project (RiPP) cohort proved to be invaluable for me as I struggled with selecting my methods, wrestled with ethical questions and "climbed the conceptual ladder." Marina provided ongoing feedback, and posed questions and much needed pushes in my thinking along the way. The other practitioners in RiPP also played an important role as they helped to push and challenge my thinking and were an invaluable support to me in finally finishing this project.

Time Constraints

Time was an enormous issue in this project. I found it a difficult transition to move from practitioner to researcher. My eight-week group project portion was planned and carried out well within the timelines I had set out. The process after that, however, was painfully slow and there were times when I had to put the analysis and writing aside altogether to attend to other projects that came along. As such, the research did not get the time and energy that I had hoped. There was definitely a lack of continuity as I was only able to pick the work up in spurts and it did not receive the focus that I would have liked to give it.

Looking to the Data

The process of supporting youth to make change in community is full of opportunities for teaching and learning, both for the youth participants and for the adults supporting them. This project stretched all of us, and provided rich opportunities for the youth team to explore and experience being change agents.

Within this data section, I will describe the importance of highlighting, drawing out, and fostering learning. First, I will explore how adults can help frame the process for youth by supporting them to name learning as an overarching project goal. Second, I will highlight the risks that youth face as they step out and the importance of supporting them to assess and manage risks along the way. Finally, I will examine the need for adult facilitators to balance their recognition of youth efforts with continued pushing and nudging of youth participants to grow and learn.

Learning as an Ultimate Project Outcome

Although from the outset this project seemed relatively short and manageable in scope, there were many setbacks. As a team we faced several constraints—lack of time, changing schedules, difficult team dynamics and personal chaos. Each of the team members also faced a variety of personal barriers along the way. As a facilitator in the middle of it, I often found it difficult to know how to assess progress with the team, and to help the group to see successes from their efforts. In this section, I describe this struggle, and explore the importance of explicitly naming learning (individual and group) as a key ultimate project outcome.

Each youth participant came in with a set of high expectations for themselves and for the project. In our first session together, I asked the team why they were participating and what sparked their interest. Some of the responses from the initial discussion included:

- I'm here because I want to better our community. I want to lower the intake of drugs and alcohol use in the young peers. I want to be a good role model.
- I'm here because I want to change the way our community is living.
- I'm here because I want to make a difference in this community—have more activities for youth—keep youth off the streets.
- I'm here because I want to help out the town.

As the team articulated their goals, they could see the enormity of the issues they

were working with, and struggled with finding a manageable piece to tackle. Their goals came from genuine, personal concerns for their community. As young citizens they imagined big changes and had high hopes for the project. Our time together was limited (with only eight two-hour sessions all together) and although the project itself was relatively tight and do-able, the team still had a difficult time letting go of larger expectations for themselves and the process:

We had a brief discussion at the end about as D put it “It won’t happen overnight.” It will take time. It was a good point. There’s so much enthusiasm. How do you help young people have realistic expectations while not curbing their enthusiasm and ability to dream about something better?
(February 19, 2004).

Juggling the expectations also meant trying to not set the group up for not being able to finish the tasks that they set for themselves. This became even more difficult because the participants had also had many experiences with failure in the past. When asked about some of their fears for the project one participant said:

Failing. Because I know what it’s like (March 25th, 2004).

As our project unfolded, and based on more tangible indicators of success such as attendance, team dynamics, and completion of group tasks, it often did not feel very successful. For example, our numbers dwindled from seven to two participants as participants quarrelled with group members or quit for different personal reasons, and we were forced to reschedule our focus group numerous times as participants forgot and made other commitments or did not complete planning tasks.

To help the team see progress, I tried to highlight some of the learning and growth that I saw along the way. As the adult supporting the team, I pointed out successes where I could see them, and attempted to link these to the original project goals that the group had set together. I built in reflective sessions for the team to articulate their own learning, and to explore their ongoing successes as a team.

Learning about making change, however, was not what the group had set out to do. As we framed our project, the team wanted to “see and affect meaningful change” in their school community. The learning was secondary for the youth team, and their success, as they had articulated it, lay in seeing tangible project results in their school. As a result, the whole success of the project always seemed

to be in a delicate balance. I hoped that things would happen and unfold as the group had planned but many factors, some of which were beyond our control (such as scheduled events at the school or in the community that continually pre-empted the group's focus group), affected the possibility of being successful. Even when it was completely out of our hands as a group, disappointment was very difficult for group members.

As an educator, my focus in supporting the group was to foster individual, group and community learning. I saw the project as an excellent practical way for youth to build individual skills, personal agency and political power. I also saw the project as an opportunity for the team to learn about what it takes to work together for the common good, and for community members around the project to learn with and from the youth involved. In light of my goals and expectations, there were many successes.

This project highlighted for me the importance of supporting youth to explicitly set their own meaningful learning goals.

If learning becomes the main goal, other concrete tasks that the group sets for itself become opportunities for learning, both from achieving and from not achieving the goals.

Exploring Being a Change Agent

Making Change Means Managing Risks

For the participants, making change in their school community, engaging in the group's activities, felt dangerous, or, as they described it, it meant having to "stick their neck out." In this section, I will look at the importance of helping a group of youth to explore, assess and learn from risks they are taking.

Towards the end of the project, the youth team ran a particularly difficult focus group session at their school. The session was to get students' input for future activities they hoped to plan. Team members wanted ideas and possibly even some volunteers to come forward to work with them. Very positive things came from the focus group, for example, some students got excited about the proposed plans, offered ideas and congratulated the team on their efforts. The input was useful and about 16 people also signed up to help start a council at the school.

The meeting itself, however, was very challenging for the team. Students had

been made to come to the focus group by their teachers and many were mad to be missing gym class. A few ideas that were put forward by students were shot down right away by louder voices who laughed out loud or told them the ideas would never work. A crew of hecklers sat outside the group with their arms crossed, talked constantly during the focus group, ignored the youth team facilitators and made it difficult to move things forward.

As we wrapped and debriefed the day at our reflective session, one team member couldn't get past the frustrations of the meeting:

S said nothing... His face was red and he was obviously very upset by the day. I talked with him about the meeting and he said that was what he expected. "Whenever anyone tries that's what happens." He left angry and discouraged (March 12, 2004).

After sitting with it for a week (Spring Break), the group was able to talk about it. Although they acknowledged that there had been positive outcomes from the focus group, the general consensus was that it hadn't gone well. Some of the comments during the group reflections show the lingering frustration and disappointment:

Melanie: How did you feel about the focus group?

S: Not good. If there hadn't been Spring Break—I wouldn't be here.

Everyone's stupid. All life they've been let down. Maybe they don't trust us.

B: Lots of retards. They didn't know what they were talking about....

Melanie: What's one thing you gained from doing the focus group?

Whole group: Negativity (March 25, 2004).

The team felt discouraged by the meeting. We talked about their expectations; they had hoped for three students to come, and had over 35 show up! They had hoped for some volunteers to step forward, and 16 students signed up. For the goals set out beforehand, the focus group was a success. The overwhelming feeling however, was one of disappointment. A few key voices in the crowd had soured it for the team and they felt frustrated with the outcome from their efforts.

This example shows some of the challenges and real risks that the youth team was facing as they undertook the project; they were voicing their opinions, and taking a stand to make change in their close-knit school community, and the response they got (or what they perceived to be the response) was being laughed at, put down and basically ignored.

During other reflective sessions in the project, the participants also spoke about the pressure they felt from their peers, as they stepped up and spoke out. Whether real or perceived, the group struggled with feeling like their friends and fellow students were scrutinizing their behaviour. Just speaking out and having an opinion made them a role model for others. This was uncomfortable for the group and they talked about it with each other on a few occasions.

As this group learned, you stand out when making change. It can be isolating, and it can come with pressure. Although difficult, these risks became excellent opportunities for discussion and learning about what it takes to make change. The team still believed strongly in their project and had to weigh how important their actions were in light of the risks they were taking.

As the facilitator, I had a revelation about some of the dynamic factors at play as youth undertake such a project. I learned that it is crucial to help youth explore the risks they are taking, to assess them along the way, and to learn from them.

In retrospect, such a large meeting at the school was not the best choice for the group to do their first public presentation or to try their hand at soliciting input from their peers. A smaller, friendlier crowd would have been a more appropriate first audience for this very tentative, nervous and fragile group. Peer recognition and acceptance are such important factors for teens, and as the facilitator I can see how important it would have been for the team to explore this thoroughly before choosing their focus group venue and format.

I have learned that it is important to support youth as they figure things out. Part of shaping a learning process is helping youth to name what risks they are taking along the way, and to assess which they are willing to take as they try to make change in the community. Youth need to be supported to ask these questions as they step out, and also to debrief and make sense of the experience as they move through it.

Experiencing Being a Change Agent

Incremental Recognition and Responsibility

As the facilitator, I sometimes struggled with how best to balance encouraging the youth team in their efforts while challenging them in their thinking and behaviour as the project unfolded. One area, in particular, was the team's reluctance to involve other youth. In this section, I explore the importance of

incrementally recognizing youth achievement while also incrementally building in more responsibility for their behaviour, attitudes and thinking.

Although the team talked about wanting more youth involved, and hoped for more energy and support from their peers, they were resistant to working with others from the very beginning. In the debriefing meeting after the focus group described above, we talked about some of the interest coming from other youth to get things going at school. More help and energy was what the team talked about wanting. A couple of new clubs had been started at the school (for teens wanting to get out of drinking and drugs) but the group seemed resistant to bringing others in. They felt it was in a sense competition for them:

B: Some people want to get involved and we had 16 signed up.

S: I don't think they're serious.

S: Have you noticed there's lots of people trying to start things up?

B: It annoys me. I hate it (March 25, 2004).

I found this contradiction interesting. In part, I could understand why the group was not keen to involve more youth. Since the beginning of the project, team members were getting a great deal of support and recognition from the adults around them. The team had been approached by a number of different adults and individually asked to help start two different youth councils, to help run a youth summit, and to fundraise for and run a youth entrepreneurship club. The youth team enjoyed this recognition and said they felt valued and honoured to be asked. One participant said she had never been approached for something so important before in her life.

As we had been working together for a few weeks however, I decided the team could handle a bit of a push. I brought this contradiction up at one of our meetings. We were starting to discuss the prospect of having a council start up in the school to run the activities for youth. We talked about what that might look like and how we could bring others in.

The team at this point was quite proud of its accomplishments. They told me that if there was going to be a council, they should be the ones running it. We talked about elections and how with due process more students would get involved and feel ownership. Team members were completely opposed to this:

They made comments briefly about how great the council was going to be, how they were going to be in charge, how they had put so much work in and now no one else was going to take over and tell them what to do after all they

had put in. They referred to the other “lazy students” over at the school who would probably just expect to benefit from their hard work (May 5, 2004).

I continued to push the team on this point until the end of the project. I did not think it was acceptable for them to propose support from the school, unless they were willing to involve other youth. They held their ground. Although we talked about this on a few occasions, I was not sure how much the two had actually considered the points I was making. In the end however, they talked about this in their final wrap-up and presentation. They had thought about it more together and decided that elections were a good idea. In the presentation they talked about how much they needed to work together to make things work, and the importance of having elections so that all youth felt ownership:

He actually suggested elections to the staff for the fall! These were the two who said before that “after all their hard work, no one else is going to be in charge.” I couldn’t believe it (May 19, 2004).

I saw the importance of recognizing the efforts and achievements of youth in increments, while also incrementally increasing their level of responsibility. Challenging the remaining participants until the end of the project was very difficult. The last two left holding the project pieces together were indeed to be commended and as such felt a strong sense of entitlement. As the facilitator, I could see how important it was to both appropriately recognize and celebrate their efforts while also pushing them to a deeper level of thought and responsibility. By meeting the different challenges in the project, these participants showed they were also capable of more. Supporting a learning process meant challenging them in their thinking, attitudes and behaviour along the way.

Discussion and Further Questions

Looking over and analyzing my findings from this project was a humbling experience. As a practitioner, I have supported other teams of youth, doing similar projects. My work and my passion is fostering active citizenship and it makes me hopeful to see young citizens engaged in issues that affect them in the community. Although short, this project has reminded me, what a challenging undertaking it is for young people to go against the grain, to make themselves heard, and to put themselves out there. The youth team that I worked with were courageous and took risks.

For the team, making change meant shifts in how they related to those around them. It came with real and perceived pressure from those they related to. Although a seemingly small project, the group was recognized, applauded, put down, and made fun of for their efforts. Stepping out and participating in the project was one fragile step in being an active community member for most on the team. And it was one challenge that these youth chose to take on amid the many other life challenges they face.

As community members, we are all influencing and shaping our community all the time, whether for positive or for negative. I hope the project was only one experience that these group members will have with seeing and naming something of importance to them, and trying to consciously make a change. As the findings from the research have shown, the experience itself is full of opportunities for learning as youth and adults work together as change agents.

As the facilitator, I was reminded of the importance of making space for the team to make sense of the experience and the risks they were taking. As shown, the youth’s efforts had consequences (positive and negative) in other parts of their lives. My role was to ask questions, provoke discussion and to help the team explore and figure out the steps they were willing to take in light of what they were experiencing.

My role was also to push and nudge the youth as they moved through the project. The experience of being a change agent came with a great deal of recognition from adults in the community. This was a motivating factor for the youth in the team, and definitely an important part of supporting the group. I was reminded, however, how important it is to recognize youth efforts incrementally while also incrementally increasing expectation. As team members showed they were capable of more, part of supporting them needed to be raising the bar, as well.

Overall, I have learned that an adult who wants to support marginalized youth to make change in the community needs to *sustain a learning process* where youth

can experience and explore what it takes to be a change agent.

Some Questions and Considerations

I have learned a great deal by putting on the researcher's hat, and examining one question in my practice. Engaging in this process, however, has also left me with many more questions and considerations to pursue in my practice.

First, as mentioned by Ginwright (2005) and Camino (2005) in the literature review, if we focus solely on youth development in youth-adult partnerships, we are missing out on the energy, ideas and learning that adults can also gain from the experience. For a partnership to work there must also be a sense that both parties have something to offer, and a mutual recognition and valuing of the life experience, ideas, and creativity each holds.

For an adult wanting to work with youth in this way, *How do we remain open, to really listen to and learn from youth we are supporting? How do we keep relationships genuine?*

Part of facilitating a learning process means allowing the discoveries, interests and learning of those involved to shape the direction of the project. As an adult supporting youth I have learned that I need to build tight frameworks for how we work together, but the content and the direction we take is determined by the youth I work with. Part of working in partnership with youth means letting go of the control. It requires give and take, flexibility, and it requires adults to go with the flow. Often it means that I cannot predict project outcomes and must wait until they unfold.

This points to the need for flexible structures in organizations that support such work. The organizational structure at The Learning Shop allows me to work in a way that is responsive to the interests and ideas of youth, to move where the group needs to go and not where funding requirements demand. As Zeldin *et al* (2005) point out, to work in youth-adult partnerships, a certain amount of organizational buy-in will be necessary.

For organizations wanting to support youth-adult partnerships, *what are the organizational challenges to supporting youth in this way? Where do our organizational structures and cultures need to shift to support and sustain a learning process?*

The project also reminded me of how much youth do share adult concerns. The team members I worked with were passionate about the topics we discussed and had a personal connection with the issues they were tackling. Our project represented such a small part of what these youth wanted to accomplish. I struggled as I wrapped up with this youth team, because I felt in some ways that I had set up an expectation of support that I could no longer follow through with. I am aware of how few opportunities exist in our community for youth to be supported in this way. We have limited resources and practitioners are generally overstretched in their work.

For adults wanting to support youth to make change, *what happens after? How can we help youth to make the transition as change agents outside of time together?*

And finally, as described in the report, the youth I worked with were approached by a number of adults during the project to take on other tasks, to join other councils, to be leaders in other arenas. These offers were exciting as the team could see they were being taken seriously. One participant said she felt honoured to have been asked to get something going in her home community. As someone working closely with the team, however, I could see how much work and effort it was for the crew to keep it together enough to finish the project on the table. I was so aware of the barriers team members faced to take their ideas to action, to work together to make things happen, and to actually complete what we had started as a team.

The group that I worked with were also youth with incredible personal barriers. Adult practitioners around these youth were probably used to seeing them when in crisis. It must have been encouraging to relate to these young adults in a new way, to be helping them on a project they were energized about. As I worked on this project I began to see how much our eagerness to support youth is woven into our own desire to see change.

With the dire circumstances in rural and remote communities, youth seem to represent the combined hopes for something better. Practitioners, family members, and community members long to see a healthy generation that is able and willing to stay at home, to have a vision for the future, and to help shape the community. It is no wonder that when a young person steps up or speaks out for positive change, the adults in our community jump at the chance to support them.

As adults working to support youth, *how can we balance our hopes and expectations for the younger generation? How can we support young people to have*

a vision and make change without overly burdening them with our own hopes and dreams? How do we ensure that youth have lots of support for the learning they are embarking on, and are not left to their own devices?

As we work together to build transformative youth/adult partnerships within community, I believe we need to keep asking questions. If as adult practitioners we are committed to sharing decision-making power, allowing youth to drive and direct the work, and supporting youth to take their ideas to action, we need to be open to shifting and changing the way we work together.

Writing this report has been a challenge for me, with having to probe and analyze my own practice and weigh my own risks while choosing words to describe my learning in a respectful way. It has felt vulnerable at times. I have been inspired by the team of youth I worked with to push myself, to keep asking questions of myself and to take my own risks at times.. Their passion, vulnerability and determination to make change in the midst of enormous personal barriers reminded me of the humanity that drives real change.

While writing and analyzing, I have also had many opportunities to share my findings, my questions and my learning with other adult practitioners in my community. I have been inspired by others who are asking similar questions, who care deeply about the youth they work with and who are committed to the long work of building and shaping community.

The partnership is a rich learning opportunity. Both adults and youth need to be willing to learn together and to stretch themselves if we are to build respectful intergenerational partnerships and to support each other in making change.

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Appendix

Storytellers' Integrating Approach Cycle

Working with Young Citizens in the Upper Skeena

"We, as community members, must come forward with ways to interact and provide opportunities for our youth to learn the skills and characteristics necessary to keep our communities alive and healthy in the years to come" (Breaking barriers: A model for a literate citizenship, p. ii).

Our work at Storytellers builds on past research in the community. We know from previous inquiry what skills and characteristics are necessary to keep our community alive (Breaking barriers, 1998). Some include hard skills and competencies such as reading, writing, numeracy and critical thinking and oral communication. Others include elements of personal power or agency such as confidence, self-awareness, curiosity, and kindness, to name a few. We also know that the ability to see a future, connect to that future and to take responsibility for shaping that future is key. But how do we provide the kinds of opportunities necessary to foster these literacy skills? Some of these skills are fostered within the classroom, but not all of the necessary learning happens within the school. As a community we must find ways to work collectively to foster the whole citizen.

At the Learning Shop (Storytellers' Informal Education Storefront) we promote an active youth citizenship. In my work promoting youth engagement, I have seen how active engagement in the community helps younger citizens to wake up, to find their place, to learn and hone literacy skills, to feel a new sense of connection to place and to gain a sense of being valued by others.

In our work, youth identify their own learning needs by identifying their passions and interests, connecting these to a need, gap or opportunity in the community, and then by taking action around issues of importance to them. By working together for the common good youth have the opportunity to see themselves as community builders.

To support this process, we use an "integrating approach cycle" in our work that emphasizes building relationships and supporting youth to engage. Although this takes many different forms, depending on the group of learners, our approach involves:

Integrating Approach Cycle

Step 1. Entering and building relationships

Before beginning a project with a group we take time to get to know the learners as individuals, not as teacher/ student or as coordinator/ participant.

Step 2. Animation for individual or group wake up

Using a variety of animation tools (mapping, drama, art, adventure challenge), learners are given a space to discover their own passions and interests, to examine their realities and to explore the conditions that surround them.

Step 3. Supporting youth to organize themselves for action

Groups are supported to connect their own experience and interests with a need, gap or opportunity in the community. They then identify a potential action that could address what they see.

Step 4. Supporting the action that emerges

Groups are then supported to complete the action they have identified. Support could include formal skill development/ training, troubleshooting, pushing learners to consider and discuss issues that emerge, keeping timelines on track, helping to access community resources, offering experience or ideas, or debriefing along the way.

Step 5. Reflection and distillation of learning

As part of the experiential learning cycle, we facilitate reflection throughout the project to help groups process the experience and to draw out and track learning along the way.

Step 6. Sharing learning within the community

Finally, we take time at the end of any project to look at important learning that has come from the project, and to share this learning with an identified audience in the community.

This framework gives our work an intentional flow of pushing groups to move ideas to action, and to reflect on the learning that happens along the way. We have seen and know from experience that the process of working with others to make change is a difficult but rewarding one. Groups who are supported to take action can often see how their actions have an impact on others in both positive and negative ways. The experience raises their awareness of the power they hold as a young adults who are shaping community.

As they identify and take on an action in the community, youth and those around them have also seen and been able to identify shifts along the way. Through reflection, youth are able to see where their personal and political power is being

fostered both by the experience itself and by others in the community. They are also often able to see where they take a role in fostering this in others.