Event Brief

Webinar: Project sharing on youth engagement

November 10th, 2021

Purpose

Engaging youth is central to mental health promotion and to the work of many Mental Health Promotion Innovation Fund (MHP-IF) projects. Youth engagement, and connecting with project participants more generally, is also a moving target with virtual, in-person and hybrid options. This webinar was a chance for MHP-IF project teams to gather around virtual roundtables and share their experiences of youth engagement.

Participants

This webinar was attended by 21 MHP-IF project team members and seven Hub Secretariat members.

Meeting structure

- The webinar consisted of two 20-minute rounds of discussions, bookended with brief opening and closing remarks.

- Roundtables were led by members of six MHP-IF project teams who shared youth engagement experiences and facilitated discussions.

Round 1

  o **Room 1 – Authentic Social Identity and Mental Health (Students Commission of Canada):** Tips and tricks to make online sessions with youth more engaging and ways to embed evaluation and research into program activities.

  o **Room 2 – STRONG (Western University):** Engaging newcomer children and youth in school and community settings on and offline.

  o **Room 3 – Nation of Wellness (Matsqui-Abbotsford Society):** The 'Hybrid' Zone: Youth engagement in the time of COVID-19.

Round 2

  o **Room 1 – La santé mentale, on s'en parle! (RésoSanté)**: Experiences of youth immigrants in multiple contexts: research, social media, and organizational partners.

  o **Room 2 – Agenda Gap (University of British Columbia):** Relationship building and supporting youth leadership.

  o **Room 3 – The Cedar Path (The Pas Family Resource Centre):** Providing hybrid sessions (virtual combined with in-person) for youth.

What did we learn?

A few points of discussion across roundtables are summarized below. Notes from each roundtable are in the appendix.

- All six project teams adapted their youth engagement practices to include virtual components in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some have had a chance to return at least partially to in-person programming, while others continue to engage participants primarily online. Several expressed that they look forward to in-person engagement while acknowledging that online or hybrid engagement is likely 'here to stay' because it helps meet the needs of their communities.

- Building relationships and trust with youth is key to meaningful engagement and can be more difficult to accomplish online. Project teams shared tips to facilitate this process. One tip was getting to know participants before the start of a program and then checking in with them regularly (e.g., a check-in at the start of any group session). Another was building in humour, fun and laughter. Equally important is being patient, kind and compassionate. Projects are also finding that tapping into vulnerabilities (safely and incrementally) can help groups bond.

- Project teams continue to experiment with ways of engaging youth, including video conferencing, online chat, social media, online videos, in-person, and combinations of these.

- Empowerment is an important part of youth engagement. Examples of empowering approaches by project teams include:

  - Legitimizing multiple ways of participating (e.g., verbally or through chat; camera on or off);
  - Taking the time to learn about, celebrate, and integrate youth cultures and/ or unique characteristics as part of programming;
  - Addressing potential power dynamics (e.g., exploring what it means to co-create a project and honouring this process; never talking-down to youth; using a strengths-based approach);
  - Using questions to help youth orient themselves to new topics rather than 'downloading' information on them;
  - Developing ways of supporting youth leadership (e.g., youth decide next steps and are supported as needed).

- Effective youth engagement can hinge on effective facilitation. Some considerations include adequate facilitator-to-participant ratios, facilitators who speak participants' primary language and who can act as cultural brokers, approaching tensions amongst participants with curiosity and collaboration.

How will learnings from this event be used?

- ➢ The Hub will continue to host opportunities for project-to-project sharing.

- ➢ Resources posted on kdehub.ca include a new category on Youth Engagement and an initial set of annotated resources. If you have suggestions about additional resources, please email us at kdehub@uwaterloo.ca.

Appendix – Roundtable summary notes by breakout room

Round 1

Room 1 – Authentic Social Identity and Mental Health (Students Commission of Canada). Facilitated by Dave Shanks.

Tips and tricks to make online sessions with youth more engaging and ways to embed evaluation and research into program activities.

Dave led the group through two exercises that his team uses to engage youth as part of program delivery and evaluation: 'Step into the Circle' and 'Social Identity Mapping'.

- 'Step into the Circle' is a way of checking in with youth, easing tension, and increasing sense of belonging.
    - In a virtual setting, participants can choose to have their camera off or on and are reminded that they have total autonomy over their camera and can leave at any time.
    - Facilitators invite participants to respond to a series of questions using the format "step into the circle if…" In an online environment, participants can choose a response by using reactions (e.g., using a 'thumbs up' emoji for stepping into the circle; a 'shocked face' emoji for stepping out). They may also choose to not respond.
    - Questions used by the facilitator have previously been scored on the degree or level of vulnerability; each question is coded as a light-, medium-, or deep-level of vulnerability.
    - The goal is to use a set of questions that elicit just enough vulnerability to increase a sense of belonging, keeping in mind that context is important (e.g., internet access, whether the session is being recorded).
    - Anonymizing names (e.g., asking participants to use animal names instead of their own names) and asking participants to turn their cameras off are two ways of mediating safety concerns.
    - For this type of exercise, an ideal group size is 8-12 participants and having two individuals co-facilitate is recommended.
- 'Social Identity Mapping' is used to determine where youth are finding belonging, relationships between identity groups, and where their authentic identity can be expressed.
    - Youth are invited to write down groups that they belong to. These groups can be of any type (e.g., geography, sports, culture).
    - Participants are asked to evaluate group membership based on the following criteria: importance of membership in each group, degree to which they feel positive about their membership in each group, number of days that they would engage in activities for this group per month, number of years being a member of each group, and the extent to which they feel they are a representative of each group. Participants are also asked to note relationships or compatibility between each group and whether the groups are online, offline, or both.
    - Facilitators then compare the maps and use a series of questions to debrief participants and consider the maps together.

Room 2 – STRONG (Western University). Facilitated by Gina Kayssi and Maisha Syeda.

Engaging newcomer children and youth in school and community settings on and offline.

After describing the STRONG project, Gina and Maisha shared five strategies to build engagement with newcomer youth:

- Start building a relationship with the youth before the program even starts.

    o Take some time to have a one-on-one meeting to get to know the youth (e.g., What are they interested in? What are things that are off-putting to them? What are their struggles?).

    o If possible, incorporate some of their interests into programming – this shows that you are listening, care, and are tailoring the program to their needs and interests.

    o The project team has found that this is more difficult to do in a virtual setting.

- Address language barriers.

    o Conversational English skills are usually a requirement to participate, but the project team has made the program more accessible by hosting sessions in other languages.

    o The team has found that engagement is more genuine when sessions are in participants' first language, especially when dealing with vulnerabilities.

- Organize activities so that youth can interact with their peers more freely.

    o Relationships and sense of belonging increases when youth can interact with their peers (rather than just a facilitator).

    o Use breakout rooms for this purpose.

- Create a space where youth can celebrate their culture and background.

    o The STRONG team hosts an icebreaker where youth are invited to share a picture, an item, Google image, or a memory that reminds them of their home country. This helps the group learn more about each other's backgrounds.

    o Ask each participant to teach others in the session one word from their own language. This is particularly effective when engaging youth who find it difficult to communicate in English.

- When working with younger age groups, engaging parents is very helpful.

    o Inclusion of parents in the STRONG program was pivotal to ensure the success of implementing the intervention within the home setting. A graduate student developed parent sessions to allow the parents to understand what skills their children are learning, and to have a way to get support they may need.

    o Parents sometimes tend to focus on their children's struggles (e.g., with school). In such cases, the STRONG team helps bring more attention to the child's and parent's strengths and how they can continue to build those strengths. They ask the parent to share how they got through something that was challenging and invite them to co-create and exchange those skills with their child.

Room 3. Nation of Wellness (Matsqui-Abbotsford Society). Facilitated by Mai Berger and Brittany Maple.

The 'Hybrid' Zone: Youth engagement in the time of COVID-19.

Mai and Brittany described experiences and learnings related to evolving pandemic adaptations to youth engagement practices for Nation of Wellness (NOW), a youth-led project in Abbotsford British Columbia.

- The project hosts community dialogues, called *Just for NOW*, on topics identified by youth; these are attended by youth, representatives of community partners and other interested community members.

- To accommodate restrictions on the size of gatherings early in the pandemic, they adopted a hybrid approach with some attendees being in-person and others online.

- This led to time-sensitive and difficult decisions around who would be present in-person and who would be online taking into consideration quality of internet connections, privacy, and social isolation; youth within the group don't always agree on the ideal mix of in-person and online.

- Hosting groups in two formats creates a challenge of disconnection between the two groups and sometimes three 'meetings' were taking place at the same time with in-person, on-line and chat dialogues occurring simultaneously. Hosting events with multiple participation options (in-person, online, chat) also requires a greater number of facilitators.

- The ratio of youth to adults was discussed, including the experiences of another youth-led project, with balance found by having leaders who are young adults and all participants (regardless of age) fully participating in all the same ways (i.e., adults actively engaged rather than observing).

- Over the course of the pandemic, changing restrictions and individual/ family comfort levels creates a constant need to adapt and accommodate. Examples of how this team adapted include:

  - Spreading out to multiple but adjacent rooms when in-person to accommodate in-person limits;
  - Meetings in a parking lot with adequate spacing, a microphone and speakers (microphone on a 6-foot pole to accommodate social distancing);
  - Ordering tents for outdoor meetings (although tents were not immediately available).

- Joining online gives some youth an option to share in ways that in-person-only did not (e.g., using the chat function); overall the team would prefer to find ways of accommodating in-person gatherings to the extent possible.

Round 2

Room 1 – La santé mentale, on s'en parle! (RésoSanté). Facilitated by Nicolas Noël.

Experiences of youth immigrants in multiple contexts: research, social media, and organizational partners.

Nicolas led discussions about several topics relevant to his project team's experience engaging youth from immigrant communities.

- General lessons learned:
    - Youth engagement and education sector partner support is stronger when projects are initiated by youth. It is important to provide youth with the power and opportunity to propose and develop initiatives.
    - Volunteering experience appears to be a good way to create incentives for engagement.
    - Never treat youth like children – many teens are highly engaged in community work and they do not appreciate being treated like kids.

- Social media:
    - The team has been using Instagram to communicate about the project but is hoping to start using it as a tool for sharing information about mental health (e.g., about anxiety). They have been drawing inspiration from others on Instagram (not all related to mental health).
    - TikTok is a platform of interest and may be a way of reaching younger age groups.

- Talking about mental health:
    - Talking about mental health is a central facet of this project, and yet it can be very difficult to have conversations about this topic, particularly if there are negative cultural representations, taboos, or a connection with spirituality or other external factors. Getting young people to speak freely about their mental health has been a challenge.
    - The team is developing a resource highlighting the importance of talking about mental health, how to break the stigma (mental health is not a disorder), and how to talk about mental health in different contexts (at school, at home, and with friends).
    - Language is important. 'Mental health' can scare some away – using 'mental wellbeing' may be preferrable. Others in the group agreed and added that for immigrant populations, offering sessions in the participants' primary language and employing cultural brokers can be helpful.
    - Roundtable participants highlighted the importance of engaging parents in discussions about mental health in an empowering, non-judgmental, and non-threatening way (e.g., by focusing on what they are doing well).

- Partnerships:
    - Education sector partners are key for engaging more youth as part of mental health promotion. Increasing partner capacity will be a focus for Phase 2. Challenges to overcome include competing priorities and limited capacity.
    - An important role for school partners is to promote the program. To do so, abilities to address some mental health topics or to identify vulnerable individuals can be helpful and often need to be strengthened.

Room 2 – Agenda Gap (University of British Columbia). Facilitated by Liza McGuiness and Tyesa Kruz.

Relationship building and supporting youth leadership.

Liza and Tyesa described significant components of building relationships with youth online and supporting youth leadership in policy change.

- Intentionally forming groups (based on pre-existing communities that shared a common experience) helped generate common goals for their advocacy work.

- Laughter and fun can help facilitate sharing. Project participants and facilitators engage with a variety of topics, including some that are heavy, complex, or challenging. Creating opportunities to be silly or lighthearted has helped with engagement.

- Priming participants to understand that they are co-creators of the program and implementing an anonymous survey facilitates continuous improvement.

- Limiting how much information is presented to a maximum of 5-10 minutes and varying modalities (e.g., video, pictures, drawing activities) helps with engagement.

- Letting youth know that project team members are not necessarily experts and that they are learning as much from participants as participants are learning from them. This helps modify power dynamics and puts everyone at ease. Explicitly exploring the connection between roles and power may also be helpful (e.g., what is an adult versus a youth?).

- Using questions can help youth orient themselves to concepts that may be unfamiliar or unclear and increase retention. For example, start by asking youth what they think a concept (e.g., 'intersectionality') means and build from there with more questions, incrementally providing more information about this concept.

- Allowing youth to lead means attuning to what they want to do next and supporting them in taking these next steps. This process takes time. For example, a participant may decide on a policy target, then the project team will do some background work on that topic (e.g., a list of experts) and present this to the youth. The participant then decides on a next step (e.g., talking to an expert) and is supported as needed (e.g., helping prepare for the conversation).

- In instances of disagreement between participants, it is important to validate different points of view. Jamboards and Google docs can be helpful collaborative tools for getting participants to share their thoughts and for exploring different views, especially by asking questions about what they shared. Revisiting these documents can also be helpful because understandings expand over time and sometimes eventually converge. In other instances, tensions may arise due to different understandings of project goals or concepts. This can be addressed with the project team revisiting and clarifying their own conceptualization of project activities.

- Additional tips include makings things action-oriented and breaking them down into small activities, checking-in with participants, legitimizing various ways of being engaged (e.g., over chat), and privileging smaller online groups.

Room 3 – The Cedar Path (The Pas Family Resource Centre). Facilitated by Lisa Gamblin.

Providing hybrid sessions (virtual combined with in-person) for youth.

Lisa talked about how The Cedar Path, a primarily land-based project, has continued to engage youth through the course of the pandemic by using a hybrid model.

- Partnerships with other youth projects, particularly those with strong youth connections, were instrumental for reaching youth. Partnerships also helped increase mutual capacity. For example, a partner with access to recording space and equipment made it possible for youth to record their own videos.

- Recording and sharing videos has been an effective way of reaching and engaging youth on- and offline. Videos (e.g., how to trap and prepare game animals) convey knowledge and skills and have been useful for program promotion: youth who normally wouldn't have come in-person became interested in attending the program after having viewed these videos. In addition to reaching more youth, this modality also reached the broader community. For example, family members viewing cooking videos had a chance to practice their own skills and to learn about the program.

- Videos also helped support Indigenous teachings. For example, one video showed a cultural advisor spending time with and talking to an owl that was perched near a road. This was a new perspective for those who don't normally engage with wildlife, as well as an opportunity to hear Indigenous teachings about owls and to access mystery and ancestral knowledge.

- Supporting online program engagement and accessibility included preparing and distributing kits (e.g., food or medicine kits that related to video content) and purchasing and distributing tablets to youth that did not have access to a device.

- Program facilitators were initially concerned about youth uploading videos to TikTok due to risk of exploitation. This led to the development of a 'how to create your own TikTok safely' workshop.

- Being patient, kind and compassionate goes a long way to promote trust and build relationships with youth, particularly those who may have trauma or mental health disorders. Youth that take part in in-person programming sometimes take a long time to get comfortable or to actively engage, but many will eventually seek out program staff that they have observed to be approachable and begin opening up to them.

- The hybrid model is most likely going to continue because it responds to the needs of the community and increases accessibility.