YouthScape
community based. youth paced.

A FUNDER'S PERSPECTIVE

John Cawley, Program Manager,
The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

July 2010

THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

LA FONDATION DE LA FAMILLE J.W. MCCONNELL

"We thought YouthScape would simply be a nice addition to our youth programming portfolio. If we had known ahead of time that it would hold a mirror up to our behaviour, culture, and practices and expose our well-meaning but paternalistic approach, we never would have got involved... but I am really glad that we did."

Executive Director, community partner

ABSTRACT:

Based on a funder's experience, this paper discusses the design, implementation and evaluation of a complex, emerging initiative. It explores the diversity of strategies – healing, empowering, engaging, and organizing – that community organizations can adopt for involving marginalized young people in community development activities. Some vital lessons were learned: creating authentic spaces for intergenerational learning and action stretches individuals out of their comfort zones and challenges mainstream organizations' governance structures and tolerance for risk. As well, breakthroughs at the policy and structural level are usually preceded by widespread behavioural and cultural shifts.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

YouthScape:
A funder's perspective

AN OVERVIEW

In 2005, the Trustees of The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation approved an initiative entitled *Building Resilient Communities by Engaging Youth* (subsequently renamed *YouthScape* by its participants). The objective was to test and learn from promising approaches for engaging marginalized youth in their local communities. Historically, the majority of the Foundation's youth initiatives have focused on developing the leadership capacities of students or on strengthening youth-led organizations.[1] By contrast, YouthScape was part of the Foundation's inclusion strategy, focusing on young people who feel disconnected from school and other mainstream organizations led by adults. Engaging young people in local decision-making develops and draws upon their knowledge, skills, and values, and in doing so, it serves to enrich democracy in our communities.

Building on the experience of many youth engagement programs[2], the Foundation invited coalitions of community partners, including youth, to address opportunities or challenges of particular interest to youth (e.g., improving recreation programs, reducing tension among racial groups, finding voice through art and music, improving relations between homeless youth and the police, etc.). Over a period of 4 years, the Foundation committed $2.1 million to the initiative, of which $1.2 million was used to match more than $1.5 million in local contributions to support young people in planning and carrying out local projects.[3] The balance was used to carry out national gatherings on an annual basis, provide support and training, undertake evaluations, harvest knowledge, and manage the project.

So... what happened?

---

1 Engineers without Borders, Sierra Youth Coalition, Apathy is Boring, Otesha, Meal Exchange, Free the Children, TakingIT-Global, Journalists for Human Rights

2 GETOUT, Youth In Philanthropy, Youth Innovation Fund, Growing Up in Cities

3 Each community partner received up to $100,000 per year in matching funds to support youth-led projects, train young people, strengthen organizational capacity, and lead the community collaboration. The Foundation supported Heartwood (Halifax), Boscoville 2000 (Rivieres des Prairies, near Montreal), and Action for Neighbourhood Change (Thunder Bay) over the course of the project. Communities for Children (Saskatoon) participated for 1 year and was replaced by Youth-Core (Victoria) for the final 2 years. The United Way of Calgary and Area financially supported the participation of Child and Youth Friendly Calgary in the initiative. Youth Engagement and Action (Hamilton) participated throughout the initiative in the learning community but did not receive financial support.

Within YouthScape, there are many stories of personal healing, powerful learning, and civic engagement for young people.[4] More than a thousand young Canadians, many of whom had been labeled "a problem to be fixed," have had opportunities to design and implement small projects that gave them confidence and developed important life skills. However, since many of these projects were of short duration and only benefitted small groups of young people, a conventional cost/benefit analysis might lead people to question the greater value of these projects. This focus on the outcomes of the projects needs to be complemented by an appreciation for their impacts at institutional levels and for the development of knowledge and tools that can now be applied elsewhere.

In the process of bumping up against organizational structures, municipal policies, and adult attitudes, some young people, with the help of adult allies, were able to influence system change. Families and community members have been impressed by the responsibility shown by the young people in managing money and carrying through on commitments. Local partners have been stretched to connect with different sectors and youth with whom they had little previous contact. There was a steep and sometimes difficult learning curve, but the community partners have responded to the challenge of genuinely involving youth as decision-makers, as controllers of money, as voices for change, and as emerging leaders deserving respect and support. As a result, most partner organizations have become regional leaders in creating spaces for meaningful youth participation.

> Engaging young people in local decision-making develops and draws upon their knowledge, skills, and values, and in doing so, it serves to enrich democracy in our communities.

In each community, there were a few projects that managed to create new relationships, mind-sets, and practices that have had significant ripple effects within that community:

- **Legal Lit project**: Young people in Victoria worked with police to create practical guidelines for homeless youth to understand their rights and responsibilities when stopped by police. Community organizations in other cities have been distributing the pocket-sized pamphlets produced by the project. The local community partner, YouthCore, has subsequently led workshops on the issue throughout Victoria and is now recognized as a leader in youth engagement among more established youth service providers.

---

4   See community reports, Headwaters newsletters, and stories posted on the YouthScape website.

- **_Transit system_**: Young people worked with the Calgary transit system to design new youth-friendly bus passes. The citywide art competition generated a lot of interest among youth and demonstrated to the municipality that young people, among the largest users of public transit, should be consulted on core transit issues such as routes, schedules, safety, and graffiti.

- **_Youth Action Council_**: A coalition of 100 young people involved in 16 YouthScape projects, supported by adult allies, convened a "call to action" to bridge the gap between the voices of young people and the Thunder Bay City Council. This has led to the creation of the Thunder Bay Youth Action Council which has the potential to influence City Council, the United Way and the Social Planning Council.

- **_Institutional change_**: In Rivières des Prairies, near Montreal, several mainstream institutions connected to YouthScape – including the schools, a library, and the local cultural centre – have experimented with new forms of youth decision-making to be more inclusive of cultural diversity among youth. The trust developed through successful youth-led projects (in the areas of popular culture, sports, and small business) has reduced racial and intergenerational tension in the neighbourhood.

- **_Circus School_**: The Circus Circle in Halifax began as a regular gathering of young people who lived on the street and adults who practiced circus arts. It offers a place for young people to build and share skills and be recognized for their hard work, creativity, and perseverance. It has resulted in school performances and sold-out shows at major venues.

As the Foundation's grant to YouthScape comes to a close, it is worth reflecting on some of the lessons of YouthScape from a funder's perspective. Over the next few pages, I will share some of our learning related to the following:

A) **You reap what you sow:** Reflections about the program design, observations about the qualities of an effective national partner, and lessons from the selection process

B) **Just in time coaching and support:** On building a national learning community and the use of developmental evaluation

C) **Lessons Learned:** A summary of lessons that may influence future strategies in the field of youth engagement

For a broader perspective, the reader may wish to consult the following YouthScape publications[5] that have been created by young people, community partners, the Developmental Evaluation team, and the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD):

- **YouthScape video:** A youth-paced, community-based overview of YouthScape

- **The YouthScape Guidebook** – *Changing the Landscape: Involving Youth in Social Change*

- *YouthScape Ripples:* The stories of several small grants that made a difference

- *Boscoville's guide to organizational readiness: Engaging Youth within Our Communities*

- *Developmental Evaluation Report for YouthScape:* The inside story on YouthScape – how decisions were made and group dynamics

- *DE 201: A Practitioner's Guide to Developmental Evaluation*

- *Empowering Practices for Working with Marginalized Youth*, published in the Journal of Relational Child & Youth Care Practice

---

5 These publications can be found on the Foundation's website.

A) You Reap
What You Sow

PROGRAM DESIGN

The Foundation spent several years prior to the launch of YouthScape learning about what others were doing and reflecting on how the Foundation could be strategic in supporting a youth engagement initiative. We consulted with select young people, organizations, and foundations[6] across North America to learn about different ways of engaging youth. Denise Andrea Campbell undertook research into some of the most promising approaches being employed in the field and how they might link to the strategic priorities of the Foundation.[7] We visited youth-led and youth-serving organizations within Canada to learn about their values and programs.[8] During this period, the Foundation staff created a "youth club," an informal mechanism for getting people together. This club shared research and popular culture trends and connected with young social activists to stay on top of the flow of information and to create a vibrant space for co-creation. From this preparatory work, Foundation staff developed a set of principles that summarize what we consider to be effective youth engagement practice. These principles[9] constituted an important compass for YouthScape.

Too often, youth-led projects generate enthusiasm among youth and deliver interesting results in the short term, but fizzle out at the end of the grant. A link with a mainstream organization is one strategy to sustain the energy and ensure enduring impact.

During the design phase, the McConnell Foundation was participating in a community of practice, led by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, exploring the use of a Comprehensive Community Initiative (CCI) approach to work on complex challenges. CCI goals

… go well beyond the remediation of particular problems, such as teenage pregnancy or insufficient income, or the development of particular assets, such as housing stock or new social services. CCIs attempt instead to foster a fundamental transformation of poor neighborhoods and to catalyze a process of sustained improvement in the circumstances and opportunities of individuals and families in those neighborhoods. They seek, furthermore, to change the nature of the relationship between the neighborhood and the systems outside its

6   Centre for Excellence for Youth Engagement (Toronto), Do Something (NY), Search Institute (Minneapolis), Laidlaw Foundation (Toronto), Youth Leadership Institute (San Francisco), Kellogg Foundation (Battle Creek), Ontario Trillium Foundation (Toronto) were among the more than 25 organizations and foundations consulted.

7   Denise Andrea Campbell, *Creating Change Youth Style: A Youth Action Strategy Exploration Report for the J. W. McConnell Family Foundation*

8   C Vert, Heartwood, YMCA, Environmental Youth Alliance, Growing Up in Cities, Santropol Roulant, Sierra Youth Coalition, Parc-Extension Youth Organization

9   *Guiding Principles for Engaging Youth*

boundaries by ensuring that change is locally grounded but also draws upon external sources of knowledge and resources. Thus, CCIs set out to promote change at three levels: the individual or family, the neighborhood and the broader, or system-level, context [Aspen Institute 1997: 1.2].[10]

Engaging marginalized youth calls for innovative and comprehensive approaches. One is to involve unlikely allies (e.g., homeless youth, small business owners, police, etc.) who bring a range of perspectives and skills to the table. The Foundation was concerned that youth-led projects often take place separately from adult-led institutions that can support them and in turn, be influenced by them. Too often, youth-led projects generate enthusiasm among youth and deliver interesting results in the short term, but fizzle out at the end of the grant. A link with a mainstream organization is one strategy to sustain the energy and ensure enduring impact. Conversely, in many youth projects designed by adult-led organizations, youth are participants but lack any real decision-making power.

Drawing upon the CCI model and also learning from our involvement in the Vibrant Communities[11] initiative, we encouraged community partners to employ some elements of this approach. In particular, we suggested mapping out youth issues within the context of larger economic and social issues. Secondly, we encouraged community partners to connect the design and implementation of small-scale projects to larger systems with an objective of transforming neighbourhoods rather than just completing a project.

Based on our consultation with some leading youth engagement practitioners, we decided that supporting youth-led projects was to be the preferred mechanism for ensuring that young people would be at the centre of YouthScape. To reduce the likelihood that this mechanism would generate a series of one-off, unconnected projects, community partners were encouraged to collectively choose a community issue, local system, or neighbourhood around which the grants could be clustered. Secondly, in order to leverage the energy and creativity of young people, experience from other initiatives suggested that adults could play a crucial role in helping young people to navigate complex institutions. In short, it was recognized that there was a considerable amount of front-end (identifying a community issue) and back-end (embedding successful projects into larger systems) work to maximize the value of the youth-led projects.

> We decided that supporting youth-led projects was to be the preferred mechanism for ensuring that young people would be at the centre of YouthScape. energy and ensure enduring impact.

---

10 From the Aspen Institute quoted in a Caledon Institute of Social Policy paper on comprehensive community initiatives.

11 Vibrant Communities

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

I arrived at the Foundation in November 2005 just as the Trustees were considering the final proposal. I had worked for many years in Canada and developing countries, first facilitating and later managing community-based popular education programs for young people. In this respect, I had relevant experience and contacts in the domain of youth engagement, broadly defined, and was aware of the range of approaches within the field.

Unlike many foundations, the McConnell Foundation prefers to hire generalists as program staff rather than content specialists in selected domains. For the Foundation, it is appropriate that staff have a broad understanding of community development and organizational dynamics and the generic skills to play the role of a "critical friend"[12]. With YouthScape, I discovered that having domain expertise is a double-edged sword. Understanding the concepts and dynamics of the domain and having the skills and contacts to navigate within that domain can be assets that the initiative can draw upon. However, these assets can be perceived as liabilities if they inhibit practitioners from trying something new. In a situation where the Foundation has both financial resources and some expertise, it is even more important for Foundation staff to take a low key approach, offering advice when it is asked for. In short, it can actually be easier developing collaborative relationships in a domain where one has little knowledge or few contacts; the power associated with the grantee's domain expertise balances the influence associated with the Foundation's financial support.

IDENTIFYING AND WORKING WITH A NATIONAL PARTNER

The Foundation engages national partners to lead and manage many of our initiatives. They are usually recognized leaders in their domains and bring expertise to a range of tasks:

- Designing programs with a range of stakeholders

- Managing granting processes with community organizations

- Providing technical expertise, coaching, and training

- Capturing lessons and communicating them to broader audiences

- Influencing policy development[13]

---

12 A critical friend is primarily interested in helping the grantee improve its performance rather than enforcing accountability measures. That can consist of introducing grantees to helpful allies or training opportunities, posing questions that help them to be more strategic or connecting them with new ways of thinking or working that nudge them out of their comfort zone. The relationship is built upon trust. If a grantee transparently shares information about operational or strategic challenges associated with the project or the organization, a critical friend, as a first reflex, seeks ways of providing support or at least of acting as a sounding board.

13 For an extensive discussion of the role of national partners as intermediaries, see *Toward More Effective Use of Intermediaries*

After scanning the landscape of youth engagement activity in Canada, the Foundation contracted the International Institute for Child Rights and Development (IICRD) to assist the Foundation with grants management, provide coaching to communities, connect YouthScape to other youth networks, and document learning. This decision was primarily made on the basis of their successful leadership of the *Growing Up in Cities* initiative in Canada, a multi-site project that tested new approaches to including young people in municipal decision-making and community life. The Foundation is currently assessing what we are learning about the use of national partners across all our initiatives to see if there are any patterns or lessons to inform our future granting practice. Here are four observations about the national partner's role in YouthScape:

- **Alignment of values:** Perhaps the most important attribute of an effective national partner is the synergy between the goals of the initiative and the *values* of the national partner and its key players. This is particularly important in an emerging situation where we are collectively finding our way. When things occasionally got messy within YouthScape, the Foundation could count on the personal and organizational integrity of IICRD to keep the principles of youth engagement front and centre.

- **Ability to multi-task and shift gears:** In YouthScape, as in other Foundation initiatives, the role of the national partner changed over time. The first phase tends to focus on project management: building constructive relationships, supporting the grant holders to launch the project locally, and putting granting mechanisms in place. It can be labour intensive, hands on work that demands emotional intelligence in finding the right balance between providing national direction and supporting local self-determination. As initiatives evolve, other skills and knowledge are required. Within YouthScape, this included the provision of timely training and linking to other ideas and networks. Finally, as the community projects bear fruit, there is more opportunity to exploit the research and policy implications of the initiative. It is rare for one national partner to be uniformly good at all three stages. Consequently, the Foundation has sometimes engaged more than one national partner or changed partners over time in recognition of shifting priorities. The early phase of YouthScape probably stretched IICRD's human resources and experience the most. At times, their role as administrative monitor of the grants might have compromised their role as supportive coach – at least in the view of some communities. Over time, the initiative played more to IICRD's strengths of creating a robust learning community and connecting community activity to larger systems, including research and policy networks.

- **Capacity to balance coaching and research:** From the Foundation's experience, collaborations between academics and community practitioners often face the challenge of bridging cultural gaps: different languages, mindsets, ways of working, and priorities. Whereas academics often relish the process of teasing out concepts without an expectation of resolving a vigorous debate, practitioners need to make timely decisions with "good enough" information. Several of the IICRD staff involved with YouthScape brought significant academic experience and research skills to the initiative. Their capacities to capture lessons from YouthScape will leave a substantial legacy that has potential to influence youth engagement policy and practice. In spite of IICRD's extensive international experience and skills in managing community-based projects, community partners commented that they would have benefitted from more timely coaching and on the ground support about the practicalities of engaging youth.

- **Clarity about roles and authority:** With any initiative, the Foundation needs to be clear with the national partner if any parameters have already been determined by the Foundation. In these situations, the role of the national partner is to communicate these minimum requirements clearly to community partners. Some other decisions may be made jointly, others by the national partner, others by communities, and many are made collectively. Within YouthScape, we struggled at times with this situational leadership: in the first eighteen months we occasionally fell into a "good cop/bad cop" dynamic where IICRD encouraged communities to paint outside the lines, while the Foundation reminded them about a couple of minimum requirements – in particular, the need to have a small grants fund to support youth-led projects.

SELECTION PROCESS

The Foundation and IICRD undertook a Request for Proposals (RFP) process to gauge community coalitions' interest and ability to participate in YouthScape. We received 24 applications of which 7 received planning grants to develop more complete proposals and to continue developing the skills and relationships to carry out the project. IICRD undertook site visits to coach and support community coalitions over a period of several months and convened a gathering of all 7 community partners. Complete proposals were submitted 8 months later, from which an advisory group and IICRD recommended 5 to receive matching funding from the Foundation.[14]

Some of the lessons of the selection process within YouthScape were as follows:

- **Limits of a Request for Proposals process:** RFPs sometimes tell us more about the proposal writing abilities of candidates than their capacities to do the work. With more knowledge of the domain, we have concluded that some innovative practitioners submitted weak proposals to YouthScape and were not funded; and the reverse also occurred. We might have avoided this by including an intermediate stage in the selection process (i.e., by not moving so quickly from 24 to 7 proponents).

- **Assessing readiness and "fit":** The Foundation is often reluctant to undertake site visits to potential candidates within an RFP process. From our experience, the presence of Foundation staff can raise expectations and create personal connections that undermine the credibility of the selection process. Although site visits were conducted by IICRD, we were not always able to gauge the capacities of candidates to engage excluded youth, nor the "street credibility" of candidates. We have since developed tools for assessing the readiness of community organizations to engage youth meaningfully.[15]

- **Use of an advisory group:** The Foundation supported IICRD in establishing an advisory group[16] to provide recommendations to IICRD about YouthScape's overall strategy. The

---

14 The United Way of Calgary and Area funded the Calgary project.

15 "The YouthScape Guidebook – Changing the Landscape: Involving Youth in Social Change"

16 Landon Pearson (former Senator and Advisor on children's issues); Che Kothari (Manifesto Community Projects/Hightop Studios); Denise Andrea Campbell (City of Toronto); Elizabeth Barot (Canadian Commission for UNESCO); Barb McMillan (Community Foundations of Canada); as well, Ginger Gosnell-Rogers (First Nations Research Center) and Claude Perras (Rio Tinto Alcan) provided valuable advice to the Initiative

group provided valuable input into the design phase, the selection process and the analysis of proposals. During the implementation phase, certain individuals within the advisory group were available to provide timely advice on key issues or share useful contacts. However, the rapidly evolving nature of YouthScape meant that this group's annual meetings were mostly spent keeping the members well-informed and renewing relationships. After YouthScape was established, it might have been interesting for this group to advise the Foundation on how YouthScape contributes to our larger youth engagement strategy, rather than to offer IICRD advice on YouthScape *per se*.

- **Granting to charitable organizations:** Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) regulations stipulate that foundations may only make grants to registered charities. However, in the field of youth engagement, some of the most innovative work is being undertaken by start-up organizations rather than by established charities. If a foundation wishes to financially support a community organization that is not a charity, it can only do so through a fiduciary, a registered charity which agrees to formally manage the grant on behalf of the organization carrying out the work. Registered charities are understandably more focused on risk management, on adhering to organizational policy and procedure, and on protecting the assets of the organization than start-up organizations. In this context, some of the edgier youth-led organizations had difficulty getting fiduciaries or, if they did find a partner, experienced tension between the risk associated with innovation and the desire for mainstream credibility.

When the seven complete proposals were submitted, the Foundation was faced with a difficult situation. While all of the potential candidates had positive profiles in their communities and track records of working with youth, only a couple had relevant experience of working with marginalized youth. Secondly, most of their attempts to build local coalitions focused on a narrow band of youth-serving social agencies; local government and businesses[17] did not have strong presences.

The Foundation seriously considered pausing and reopening the selection process. Instead we decided to persevere with the five best candidates, recognizing that significant training and support would be necessary on multiple fronts. For example, in three communities, we encouraged the successful applicants to work in collaboration with youth-led organizations with more street credibility or specialized expertise (e.g., art and social inclusion, support to street-involved youth, etc.). In most communities, YouthScape became a project of one organization and assumed its culture rather than a movement coordinated by a diverse coalition. In two communities, there were real risks of "business as usual": using YouthScape funds to support the coordinating agencies' existing projects that did not really address the initiative's objectives. In retrospect, we might have invested more time and resources training community partners in both working with marginalized youth and in building effective coalitions.[18]

> The Foundation seriously considered pausing and reopening the selection process. Instead we decided to persevere with the five best candidates.

---

17 In YouthScape there has been very little contact with business or the development of entrepreneurial skills. This was a missed opportunity since many marginalized youth are preoccupied by getting a job and earning money.

18 IICRD has effectively employed their "Triple A" methodology for training community partners in participatory assessment, analysis and action around the world. During the 8 month preparation phase, community partners would have benefitted from this training.

B) "Just in Time" Coaching and Support

THE NATIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

YouthScape has reminded us that civic engagement happens in incremental steps, usually starting from personal involvement in a local issue. Policy and structural change happen much more slowly than shifts in personal attitudes and behaviour. The journey from personal awareness to informed collective action does not follow a predictable, linear path. In the *Growing Up in Cities* project, for example, skate-boarders started off only wanting a safe place to skate. It was several months later with the support of "skater moms," that they became interested in zoning regulations and the municipal budgeting process – preconditions to building a new skateboard park.

> The journey from personal awareness to informed collective action does not follow a predictable, linear path.

To ensure that community partners learned from each other and from other youth initiatives, a national learning community was established within YouthScape. It included regular conference calls, community visits, an electronic platform for sharing and creating knowledge, and annual gatherings for training and networking. We learned that it is not always necessary or desirable that the learning process be the subject of so much introspection and discussion at the front end, as it was with YouthScape. Framing community activity in a larger context and making connections (conceptual and institutional) are often more effective when they are introduced when the participants are clamouring for it, rather than being part of the explicit agenda from the beginning, like a curriculum. In this respect, the national learning community was probably initiated too early in the project. As one community member put it: "We were asked to share learning before we had anything worth sharing." The national gathering in Banff was completely different: after two years of the project, including a year of successful granting, the community partners were comfortable sharing with each other and open to learning. By the end of the project, the community partners were co-creating a video and contributing to a guidebook for use across the country.

DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION

It was often difficult to know if YouthScape was "on track" because there was no identifiable road map that we could follow. To be sure, the initiative had developed a set of principles[19]

---

19 *Guiding Principles for Engaging Youth*

associated with effective youth engagement and a set of guideposts[20] to take stock of how we were doing; but often, we were making the path by walking it.

Based on the Foundation's previous experience with complex initiatives, we chose to use developmental evaluation as a way of keeping track of emerging dynamics. Each community partner employed a part-time developmental evaluator. These individuals were mentored by a national developmental evaluator who worked closely with IICRD and the Foundation. The developmental evaluation team has written extensively about both its experience with Youth-Scape and the practice of developmental evaluation in general[21] so I will only add a few comments from a funder's perspective:

During the first 18 months of YouthScape, the developmental evaluators were able to surface tensions and misunderstandings which, had they gone unattended, might have undermined the entire initiative. Community partners, IICRD, and the Foundation were made aware of design flaws, subterranean grumbling, hidden strengths, and promising breakthroughs as a result of the developmental evaluators' capacities to provide real-time feedback to the initiative. Developmental evaluation allowed us to modify program designs, provide training, convene partners, and create spaces for airing concerns in ways that could never have been anticipated. In short, their contributions to the success of the initiative were significant.

> During the first 18 months of YouthScape, the developmental evaluators were able to surface tensions and misunderstandings which, had they gone unattended, might have undermined the entire initiative.

Our enthusiasm for developmental evaluation is tempered by the following cautions:

- **Skilled practitioners:** We were fortunate at the national level to have Marc Langlois' exceptional skills in observing complex dynamics and his ability to constructively provide feedback. As an added bonus, he had credibility with community partners because he is a nationally recognized leader in the youth engagement field. At the local project sites, we had a wider range of backgrounds and abilities. Our two observations about hiring developmental evaluators would be as follows:

  - Effective developmental evaluators are more likely to come from a community facilitation/popular education background than a formal evaluation one. Emotional intelligence may be more important than analytical skills; the developmental evaluator is focused on developing safe spaces for communication rather than designing rigorous methods for ensuring accountability.

20 Guideposts document

21 See the developmental evaluation reports on the Foundation's website.

- Being an effective developmental evaluator is not easy; "naming" the elephant in the room without being judgemental is a real art. In addition to being a good listener and facilitator, an effective developmental evaluator will normally be able to recognize patterns within complex systems, pose strategic questions that help groups find their own way and perhaps, most importantly, do this with an understated and appreciative presence.

- **Organizational response to developmental evaluation:** Some organizations are more ready than others to have light shone on how they interact with young people and the community. Within YouthScape, some organizations embraced the developmental evaluation role enthusiastically, but two cautions need to be highlighted:

  - Insecure organizations/staff felt threatened by the presence of a developmental evaluator who might have more field experience than they did. These developmental evaluators tended to have their input tightly limited, resulting in missed opportunities.

  - Some organizations developed dependencies on the developmental evaluator. In a couple of cases, developmental evaluators navigated organizations through treacherous waters, rather than just shining lights on the rocks and perhaps, even assumed management responsibilities.

- **Define the parameters:** Since the developmental evaluators played such a crucial role in the first year of YouthScape, their role continued and, in some cases expanded well beyond the original mandate. In the final year, they were actually functioning more as participatory action researchers than evaluators. In retrospect, it would have been useful to employ developmental evaluators intensively during the design and launch phase, as that is when much of the learning was occurring and when the shape of the initiative could still be influenced. Hopefully, both the complex issues and the dynamics of an initiative become clearer as everyone gains experience, reducing the need for developmental evaluation over time. One possible option would be to invite the developmental evaluator to annual gatherings after the launch period to help a team take stock, much like an auditor gives advice on financial management on an annual basis.

- **The meter is always running:** Since it is difficult to anticipate in advance the "knots that developmental evaluators can help untangle," their mandate can easily expand and, as a result, the budget allocated to developmental evaluation can exceed what had been anticipated. Within YouthScape, the Foundation eventually limited the mandate creep by capping the budget for developmental evaluation activities.[22] In most projects, a fully funded, external developmental evaluator will not be an option; it may simply be too expensive. As such, rigorously field-testing project assumptions against actual performance and then adjusting the proposed outcomes and design will have to become part of the organization's culture rather than a job for an external consultant. As developmental evaluation grows as a field, we look forward to seeing process guides and tools that would allow groups to manage more of the developmental evaluation function on their own.

---

22 The total budget for the developmental evaluation component of this project was $225,000. This does not include any costs associated with the DE 201 booklet.

C) Lessons Learned

YouthScape's challenges and successes have provided us with valuable learning. Fortunately, the entire YouthScape team was quite intent on capturing this learning, much of which is documented in the Guidebook and other YouthScape publications. Here are a few lessons that caught the Foundation's attention.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

Youth engagement is not really an identifiable domain within the community development landscape of Canada. To be sure, there are people who are committed to creating youth-friendly spaces within communities, organizations, and larger systems but relationships, knowledge, funding, and policy work tend to be siloed along more traditional lines: health, education, sports, employment, etc. The youth "experts" within these domains have their own languages, priorities and measures of success. Some of the most innovative youth work takes place at the margins of these domains, where potentially disruptive innovation is tolerated because it is fairly small scale and kept at arm's length from core activities.

YOUTH ENGAGEMENT FOR WHAT?

"Youth engagement terminology stuff... no one gets it. You have to be there and get involved. You have to experience it to fully understand what it means."

Young people tend to mobilize around specific community issues, such as having a safe space to skateboard, creating a café, reducing racial profiling, or cleaning up a local river. Youth engagement is a *process* to accomplish certain goals in an inclusive way, but it probably should not be the starting point or "hook" to attract youth or adult allies. During the first year of YouthScape, a significant amount of time was spent in trying to get people excited about youth engagement *per se* as the unifying theme. As one young person put it: "Youth engagement terminology stuff... no one gets it. You have to be there and get involved. You have to experience it to fully understand what it means." As a result, people drifted away from YouthScape in some communities and the project lost momentum, at least until the young people launched their own projects.

FROM HEALING TO EMPOWERMENT TO ENGAGEMENT

In the beginning of the project, a considerable amount of time was spent debating what people meant by "marginalized youth." In one community, the focus was originally on healing for "youth who could be found in jail, the psych ward or the detox centre," a high-risk strategy that pushed the community partner into providing emergency social services and stretched them way beyond their skill level. At another site, the community partner had difficulty moving beyond its comfort zone of working with high achieving students.

It may be useful to distinguish between empowerment – a process of finding one's voice, developing self-esteem and skills – and engagement – committing oneself to something larger for a sustained period of time. It is not uncommon when working with excluded individuals or vulnerable neighbourhoods to focus on empowerment, capacity building, or even healing as a precondition to engaging with more complex and diverse systems later on. Many of the local projects within YouthScape successfully created safe spaces for healing or empowerment without engaging mainstream institutions. They have, however, created solid foundations upon which to build future relationships. Just as young people start at very different places on the healing/empowerment/engagement continuum, community organizations are often more skilled with one approach than with others. To assess the readiness of an organization to embark on youth-engagement initiatives and to determine appropriate support, it helps to establish whether the priorities of young people are aligned with the capacities of the organization.[23]

COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY INITIATIVE (CCI)

We learned that comprehensive community initiatives, like youth engagement, are both about *how* we work together, as well as *what* we work on. Successful CCI initiatives seem to have clear focuses (e.g., poverty reduction, affordable housing, employment opportunities for immigrants) that emerge from participants' deep ties to their neighbourhoods and their implicit knowledge about the issues.

---

23 In the early part of this initiative, the Foundation contracted TakingITGlobal (TiG) to provide the electronic platform for the national learning community and to train young people in its use. TiG is an internationally recognized leader in this field but it was a challenge to adapt its training modules and organizational culture to accommodate the learning style of young people within YouthScape. Partly as a result of this experience, TakingITGlobal subsequently recognized its "sweet spot" as a capacity to work with engaged and highly engaged youth.

The objective of YouthScape was purposely broad to allow local partners the freedom to identify local issues and mobilize resources according to the needs and assets in the community. Unfortunately, it sometimes had the opposite effect.

> A broad mandate potentially offered the YouthScape communities significant latitude and control; ironically, however, it ended up having a disempowering effect. Particularly in the first year, we were somewhat paralyzed in our attempt to align the scope of our actions in Calgary with the scope of the national vision. The sheer breadth of the mandate seemed to discourage smaller entry points.[24]

Once the youth-led projects kicked in and young people were working on concrete activities that they cared passionately about, it was much easier to mobilize people to work together. This suggests that a shared focus and practical mechanisms for getting things done (consistent tools, training, templates, planning and accountability measures) provide the foundation and sense of security upon which people can then innovate.

YOUTH-LED PROJECTS

The mandate to establish a small grants fund in each community to support youth-led projects was a source of confusion and tension within YouthScape for the first fifteen months of the initiative – primarily because there was a misunderstanding about whether this element was an essential part of the program design or an option that communities could choose to adopt. Eventually, the issue was clarified: a small grants fund was indeed a requirement. The Foundation's push for community partners to start supporting youth-led projects was the turning point in the initiative; it put young people back at the center of the initiative. Sometimes withholding or releasing funds with specific conditions attached is the only leverage the Foundation has to unblock a challenging situation. Ironically, three of the community partners that resisted the "imposition" of a small grants fund in the beginning intend to retain it as a core activity of their organization after the end of the Foundation's grant.

> The Foundation's push for community partners to start supporting youth-led projects was the turning point in the initiative; it put young people back at the center of the initiative.

Establishing the small grants funds not only provided mechanisms for supporting youth-led projects and developing the skills of the young people participating in the selection process; it sent a clear message: we trust young people to take the lead on this initiative, including the management of money.[25]

---

24 *Reflecting on the Youthscape Initiative: Learnings and Recommendations from Calgary*, prepared by Elizabeth Dozois, Developmental Evaluator

25 In the *Guidebook*, a chapter called Taking Effective Action includes a section on youth-driven granting.

THE REAL CHALLENGE: ADULT ENGAGEMENT

We learned that the main obstacles to authentic youth engagement are usually the perceptions of adults and the practices and structures of institutions they lead, rather than any shortcomings among youth. Much of the first two years of YouthScape was spent identifying and disarming attitudes ("We will involve youth in decision-making when they are ready"), policies ("Our Board policy does not allow for minors to receive money"), and structures (bureaucratic steering committees) that hinder youth participation. To their credit, several community partners hired staff from marginalized backgrounds to work on their projects. Unfortunately, in many cases, these individuals left their positions abruptly. They were caught between the organizations' aspirations to be more inclusive and the organizations' existing cultures. Sometimes these individuals were perceived as troublemakers for challenging the programming models and hierarchical structures of an organization. In a couple of organizations, "disruptive" behaviour was recognized as a valuable contribution, revitalizing an organization with new contacts, perspectives, and ways of working. The executive director of a community organization put it this way: "We thought YouthScape would simply be a nice addition to our youth programming portfolio. If we had known ahead of time that it would hold a mirror up to our behaviour, culture and practices and expose our well-meaning but paternalistic approach, we never would have got involved… *but I am really glad that we did*."

> In a couple of organizations, "disruptive" behaviour was recognized as a valuable contribution, revitalizing an organization with new contacts, perspectives, and ways of working

ALIGNING VALUES AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

During the design and implementation of YouthScape, we came to appreciate the importance of reflecting on and articulating the values and assumptions underpinning youth engagement strategies. A number of questions arose in assessing the readiness of organizations to meaningfully engage youth:

- Is the desire to involve youth part of a larger strategy of civic engagement or simply related to a particular program activity?[26]

---

26 See for example, the *Declaration of Accountability on the Ethical Engagement of Young People and Adults in Canadian Organizations*, First Nations Child and Family Caring Society: "Youth Engagement is Not a Program; Youth engagement should be viewed as a natural way of working in the organization rather than as a special program."

- Does the organization focus primarily on addressing the needs of young people or on recognizing the skills and qualities of young people to contribute?[27]

- Does the organization recognize the *rights* of children and youth to participate in decisions that affect them?[28]

- Does the organization celebrate, nurture and embed the principles of its vision inside the daily life of the organization? [29]

We observed that many youth-serving organizations have vibrant youth programs but are more reluctant to create space for youth participation in their governance and management. Moreover, when young people take on sensitive issues or challenge authority in the community, mainstream youth-serving organizations are often unwilling to follow them there; protecting the reputation of the organization with community leaders often takes precedence.[30] Within YouthScape, there were a few occasions when young people who confronted authority on contentious issues were hoping for timely support from adult allies. "That's how it is for us – reality's tough and shit goes down and what is it you need? You need people to cover your back. That's what I was hoping for…"

"That's how it is for us – reality's tough and shit goes down and what is it you need? You need people to cover your back. That's what I was hoping for…"

From our experience, organizations often set themselves and young people up for "failure" by over-promising what they can actually deliver or by neglecting to provide adequate support as youth learn to navigate complex systems. If an organization chooses to play a bridging role between "noisy outsiders" and local authorities, there will be bumps in the road and tense moments, but these can also be the gateway to great learning and new relationships.

INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY

YouthScape reminded us that being inclusive is not just about creating opportunities for young people to participate in the local community as it currently exists; it is about appreciating the qualities, skills, and values each person possesses. It is about belonging and contributing, about being fully a citizen with rights and obligations. The process requires a change in the relationship between institutions and citizens to ensure that the nature of the participation actually resonates with people's aspirations and draws upon their skills. As one young person put it: "We do not want a seat around the board table… BORING! We want to join with you and others in creating a circle where we explore new relationships and ways of taking action in our community." The diversity of youth within YouthScape called for a range of approaches: heal-

---

27 Inspired by the Asset-Based Community Development approach, we tried to start from an appreciation of the strengths that young people have to offer.

28 IICRD encourages communities to embrace a rights-based approach with particular reference to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

29 For interesting reflections on aligning social change activities and organizational culture, see *Organization Unbound*.

30 For an excellent discussion of this issue, see Jessica A. Bynoe, *Confronting the Glass Ceiling of Youth Engagement.*

ing, empowerment, engagement, and organizing, depending on the priorities and skills of the young people. Organizations need to recognize where their strengths lie and the challenges of trying to move out of their comfort zones. In particular, we observed organizations learning how to adjust their standardized programs and norms to create spaces for excluded youth.[31]

EMBRACING THE EMERGENT

Throughout YouthScape, there has been a tension between trying to design and manage a national initiative with some common elements and creating spaces for local experimentation and living with the messiness of an emerging initiative. We learned that it may be better to test several prototypes in the field and let them shape the subsequent strategy.[32] However, the desire to figure things out conceptually at the beginning or to hold on to prevailing structures and practice certainly affected the early stages of YouthScape:

• Although YouthScape encouraged a great deal of experimentation within the parameters of the design, the Foundation did insist on the use of a small grants fund as the key mechanism across the country.

• Although the national YouthScape budget had an allocation for technical training and support that might have been controlled directly by communities, IICRD used these funds to determine the nature of support by IICRD staff.

• Although community organizations were encouraged to actively partner with unlikely allies and to create space for youth leadership, a couple were more comfortable in tightly controlling the initiative, keeping in line with their existing practice rather than taking some risks in trusting youth.

An alternative to creating a national initiative with minimum requirements would have been to support local organizations already doing cutting edge youth engagement work, provide opportunities for them to learn from each other, and build spaces for collaboration and timely peer mentorship.[33] Coaching youth-led organizations on how to partner more effectively with larger institutions might have been as effective a strategy as trying to mentor mainstream organizations on how to connect with marginalized youth. We came to recognize within YouthScape that it is often more effective to "fan embers rather than create sparks."

---

31 For example, the United Way of Thunder Bay, a mature, mainstream organization, made great strides in using the learning from YouthScape to adapt a fairly risk averse granting approach to be more inclusive of young people.

32 See Tom Wujec's TED Talk, *Build a Tower, Build a Team*.

33 The principles of mass localism might have been applied in this context.

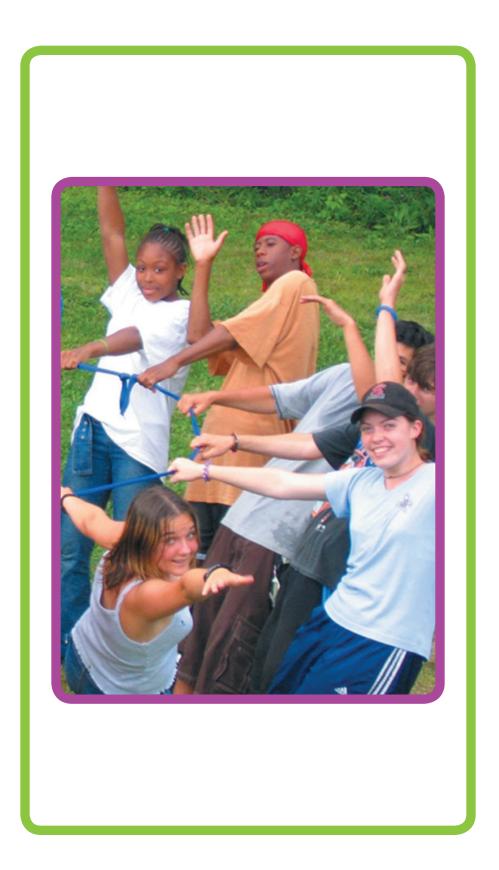# WHAT DOES SUCCESS LOOK LIKE?[34]

A complex initiative like YouthScape has the potential for multiple levels of impact: personal growth, organizational renewal, policy and structural change within local government, and changing culture around the participation of young people. We have already noted the significant benefits for participating individuals and organizations, even if the learning was sometimes disruptive. It would also be fair to say that the outcomes of YouthScape at the policy and structural level were modest. Structural change takes time and, just like any other movement, breakthroughs are usually preceded by widespread behaviour and cultural shifts. "Bottom line... the legacy that we leave when we do this work is not going to be new laws. These things are great, but are temporary. The real legacy is the sense and belief that we as citizenry have power. That understanding of success fundamentally changes a young person and how they move and navigate."[35] Within YouthScape, we repeatedly saw negative stereotypes being shattered, relationships being forged with unlikely allies, and spaces opening up for youth voices within previously impenetrable bureaucracies – evidence that social capital was being developed.

> We saw negative stereotypes being shattered, relationships being forged with unlikely allies, and spaces opening up for youth voices within previously impenetrable bureaucracies.

34 For a discussion on the importance of building social capital as a precondition or alternative to achieving measurable outcomes, see Sherri Torjman's article, *Are Outcomes the Best Outcome?*

35 Youth worker quoted in Jessica A. Bynoe, *Confronting the Glass Ceiling of Youth Engagement*

D) Conclusion

I get up.
I walk.
I fall down.
Meanwhile, I keep dancing.

Rabbi Hillel

While the Foundation's grants to these community projects have come to an end, several sites have decided to retain a granting program for youth-led projects. More importantly, all the sites have integrated lessons from YouthScape into the fabric of their organizations and their relations with the broader community. As a national initiative, we are sharing what we have learned with youth-serving organizations and will continue to collaborate with the emerging network of youth-led organizations building platforms for effective youth engagement.

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

During the first YouthScape national gathering, there was a lot of creativity and good will to create a learning community, but the diversity of people and organizations jostling for space sometimes seemed overwhelming.

One morning, we were scheduled to have a session with Landon Pearson, an internationally recognized leader in child rights and development. She was going to lead a session on the use of legal frameworks (in particular, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child) as mechanisms for promoting social change. The night before, there had been a misunderstanding that sparked some tension across racial and generational lines. It was one of those moments where facilitators are faced with a dilemma: do we try and proceed with the agenda, or do we pay proper attention to the simmering anxiety? At this point, a young Aboriginal woman who was a recovering crystal meth addict offered to lead a healing circle, creating a safe space for everyone to share how they were feeling. By stepping forward and sharing her own failures and efforts at recovery, she challenged us all to recognize falling down as a pre-condition to genuine learning.

Landon graciously ceded this time because she is a firm believer that making change in the world of human rights and political power starts with recognizing and celebrating the abilities of young people to step forward; child rights are not given, they are exercised. Throughout YouthScape, we witnessed young people and adults exploring ways for each individual to find his or her inner voice and to do so in a way that collectively changed the world around them.

> To contribute to co-creating new social realities, we only have one instrument: our selves. We cannot rely on others to effect change for us; nor can we, without violence, *get* others to change. If we want to exercise leadership in helping others from falling to stumbling to walking, we must be able to do so ourselves. If we want to exercise leadership in changing the world, we must be able to change our selves.[36]

36 Adam Kahane, "Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change"