The role of youth engagement in positive youth development and social justice youth development for high-risk, marginalised youth

Yoshitaka Iwasaki
Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

ABSTRACT
This article describes reflective experiences documented by our youth leaders and community agency partners (n = 7 & 12, respectively) who have involved in our multi-year community-based research project. Overall, meaningful youth engagement facilitated by youth leadership was highlighted as a key mechanism for positive youth development (PYD) and social justice youth development (SJYD). First, the key PYD-related concepts identified include the following: (1) strengths-based empowering approach to youth engagement, (2) capacity building and positive outcomes for youth and youth-serving agencies and (3) youth-oriented, collaborative research processes that enable the promotion of these positive outcomes (e.g. honouring youth voice: ‘bottom-up process for youth by youth’). Second, the key SJYD-related concepts identified were as follows: (a) activating the voice of youth for social/system change, and (b) advancing research into action – knowledge translation and practical application. The contributions of our youth leaders to youth engagement were shown to be vital to promoting PYD and SJYD.

Engaging marginalised youth presents a significant challenge in our society, because they are often disconnected from and distrust the systems/environments in which they live (Davidson, Wien, & Anderson, 2010; Ramey, Busseri, Khanna, & Rose-Krasnor, 2010). Yet, meaningful youth engagement is a key concept not only for optimal youth development (Alicea, Pardo, Conover, Gopalan, & McKay, 2012; Cammarota, 2011; Delgado, 2002; Lind, 2008), but also as a catalyst for system change to improve support for high-risk, marginalised youth and families (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Davidson et al., 2010; Wexler, DiFluvio, & Burke, 2009; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). Importantly, youth should be more respectfully acknowledged as a key contributor to youth development and system change (Durlak et al., 2007; Hodges, Ferreira, & Israel, 2012).

Improving health, development and wellness outcomes for marginalised youth is a shared responsibility across all systems and sectors (Delgado, 2002; Ersing, 2009; Zahradnik et al., 2010). A key challenge is the transformation of support systems to improve these outcomes for marginalised youth (Caine & Boydell, 2010; Curran, Bowness, & Comack, 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). The literature points to both the importance and challenges of using a youth-centred approach to building positive, meaningful relationships with marginalised youth by respectfully working with and engaging young people in a
youth-friendly way (Ersing, 2009; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). Specifically, the literature identifies significant gaps concerning limited efforts devoted to the use of a youth-guided/youth-led approach to the engagement of youth with high-risk conditions and behaviours (e.g. poverty, homelessness, abusive and health-risk behaviours, mental health challenges, social exclusion; Cammarota, 2011; Davidson et al., 2010; Gharabaghi & Anderson-Nathe, 2012).

Accordingly, our research reported in this article involves the strategic use of ‘youth leadership’ to support and inspire high-risk, marginalised youth in their pursuit of a more positive, engaged and meaningful life. In addition to being guided by the talents, voices and lived experiences of our youth, another strength of our research is the integration of our interdisciplinary and cross-sectorial partners into our research programme. The use of this youth-guided approach to working collaboratively with those community and university partners has important implications for the improvement of support systems and environments for marginalised youth to inspire the pursuit of a meaningful and healthy lifestyle.

**Theoretical foundation on youth engagement and development**

Increasingly, the use of a youth-oriented approach to social change is called for through working with community–university partners (Caine & Boydell, 2010; Gharabaghi & Anderson-Nathe, 2012; Richards-Schuster & Aldana, 2013). Its primary aim is to more effectively support youth with high-risk, marginalised conditions, by emphasising youth engagement and development (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Curran et al., 2010). Importantly, meaningful youth engagement is a key concept for both *positive youth development* (PYD; Alicea et al., 2012; Delgado, 2002; Lind, 2008) and *social justice youth development* (SJYD; Cammarota, 2011; Gharabaghi & Anderson-Nathe, 2012; Ross, 2011) and facilitates social/system change to more effectively support marginalised youth and families (Blanchet-Cohen & Salazar, 2009; Davidson et al., 2010; Yohalem & Martin, 2007; Wexler et al., 2009). Consequently, a blend of both PYD and SJYD (Cammarota, 2011; Ross, 2011) provides a literature-guided conceptual foundation for our research.

First, PYD seeks to promote a variety of developmental competencies that young people need at individual, social and system levels to become productive, contributing members of society (Alicea et al., 2012; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). Rather than a pathological focus, PYD adopts a holistic view of development, giving attention to youth’s physical, personal, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual development, and emphasises the strengths, resources and potentials of youth (Alicea et al., 2012; Ersing, 2009; Lind, 2008; Yohalem & Martin, 2007). PYD’s conceptual framework illustrates how the promotion of competencies at both individual and system levels leads to desired youth development outcomes (Commission on Positive Youth Development, 2005; Durlak et al., 2007; Geldhof, Bowers, & Lerner, 2013; Yohalem & Martin, 2007).

Second, SJYD involves youth’s awareness of their personal potential, community responsibility, and broader humanity, and the engagement in social justice activities that counter oppressive conditions (Cammarota, 2011; Gharabaghi & Anderson-Nathe, 2012; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011). SJYD is theorised to involve the three levels of Self, Community and Global awareness that operate to expand youth consciousness to higher levels of social criticality and human compassion through awareness of social justice in youth development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ross, 2011). Specifically, SJYD involves a critical analysis of social, economic and political factors including race, gender, class and culture, and addresses the systemic root causes of community problems (Suleiman, Soleimanpour, & London, 2006; Wilson et al., 2006). SJYD is explicitly concerned with transforming community conditions, such as inequitable power relations and conditions that are oppressive to youth and families (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & James, 2002).

A recent case study by a youth–adult partnership called the Healthy Options for Prevention and Education (HOPE) Coalition (Ross, 2011) suggests that to effectively address oppressive conditions that influence youth, a blend of PYD’s focus on individual skill building, engagement and empowerment – joined with SJYD’s emphasis on building youth’s self-awareness of how race, gender, class and other dimensions of power affect their lives – is needed. This HOPE Coalition’s Teens Tackle Tobacco initiative provided evidence for the power of youth engagement guided by PYD and SJYD to ‘transform
underlying community conditions that drive inequalities in smoking rates and tobacco-related illnesses’ (p. 697). Importantly, the integration of PYD and SJYD conceptually supports the vital role of youth as a proactive agent for changes at personal (e.g. self-identity, personal health behaviours), social (e.g. advocacy for social change) and community (e.g. policy and practice change from social justice perspectives) levels.

Youth-guided engagement research project
Our ongoing community-based research project, which started in the fall of 2011, focuses on youth and partner engagement. This home-grown project emerged from networks and dialogues with a number of government (i.e. municipal and provincial) and non-profit (i.e. youth and multicultural) agencies and university departments (i.e. extension, human ecology, public health & social work) in a western Canadian city. Then, our community agency partners that provide youth programmes have identified and recruited a culturally diverse group of youth leaders (including Aboriginal and immigrant leaders) who have relevant qualifications (e.g. interpersonal, communication and leadership skills) and diverse experiences (e.g. homelessness, foster care, racism, marginalisation) and are well connected to local youth culture. The overall principle/guideline of our research is that effectively engaging youth and community partners in a mutually respectful way to build a trustful relationship is vital to a positive transformation and systems change in order to more effectively support youth in our community. More specifically, the focus of the research is on honouring/highlighting youth’s voices and mobilising youth into actions for social change, particularly, the improvement of support systems (policy & practice) and environments (neighbourhoods, schools & communities), as guided by youth with the support of our community and university partners.

So far, our youth leaders have met over 90 times since October, 2012. The structure of these meetings is youth-oriented, including youth-led icebreaker activities, small working-group sessions (e.g. creative, arts-based), and all-inclusive dialogues (e.g. talking/sharing circles). The youth-led major activities completed so far in our project include the youth-informed development of a framework of youth engagement, as well as pilot-testing this framework through our youth leaders’ facilitation of a series of engagement sessions with marginalised youth participants (Iwasaki, Springett, Dashora, McLaughlin, McHugh, & Youth, 2014; Iwasaki, 2014).

Reflective experiences with project: youth and professional perspectives
This main part of the article describes reflective experiences of our youth leaders and community agency partners (n = 7 & 12, respectively) who have involved in our community-based research project. They provided reflective statements in the spring and summer of 2014, based on their experiences during the course of this multi-year project. These included personal written statements to describe those experiences and reflections, as well as written records from team meeting minutes in order to provide details on the participants’ insights/voices. These written statements were compiled and coded to perform content analysis in order to identify the key themes, each of which is supported by specific quotes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). The focus of this article is on reporting the key themes that describe the role of youth engagement in promoting PYD and SJYD among high-risk, marginalised youth.

Engagement and PYD
First, our youth leaders and community agency partners described several key concepts related to PYD, including the following: (a) strengths-based empowering approach to youth engagement, (b) capacity building and positive outcomes for youth and youth-serving agencies, as well as (c) youth-oriented and collaborative research processes that enable the promotion of these positive outcomes.

Strengths-based empowering approach to youth engagement
The strategic use of a strengths-based approach was a vital element of our research project. This process began with getting to know the talents and strengths of our youth leaders: ‘We started out by getting to know each other through icebreaker activities and through learning from each other’s life experiences.'
We realized the talents that each one possessed and how they could be important in understanding how to engage youth’ (YL #1). Later on, during a pilot-test of our framework, our team took advantage of ‘youth leaders’ strengths to suggest potential activities to do with youth participants’ (YL #2). Specifically, the youth leaders planned to use a series of activities such as icebreakers and art-based and talent-showcasing activities based on their skills at engagement sessions with youth participants.

This purposeful use of strengths-based approach to youth engagement was echoed by our community agency partners. A youth programme coordinator pointed out that our research enhanced ‘strength and hope’, along with a meaningful ‘relationship’ to promote a sense of belonging: ‘This research brought out a lot of strength and hope. Relationship, youth want to make connection and community, desire to belong’ (AP #1). Also, an executive director of a local youth agency convincingly stressed the use of a strengths-based, empowerment-focused approach to working with high-risk youth, as opposed to a deficit-based approach: ‘From a strengths-based approach, tapping into the strengths offers more empowerment than trying to tackle the weakness up to the “do” level’ (AP #2). The same community partner reiterated the value of our project as a means of ‘empowering’ youth and offering ‘lasting traction’ in their lives within the community:

Activities that provide a self-determination measure of success and engagement to pursue further goals and a way out of poverty with stabilization of risk factors are essential, by striving to connect youth to engagement that will be empowering and offer lasting traction in the participants’ lives and in the local community. I value that this is the aim of YEG4Youth (AP #9).

**Capacity building and positive outcomes for youth and youth-serving agencies**

Evidently, our research project has had an impact on capacity building of youth-serving agencies, as well as capacity building of youth as observed by our community partners. A programme evaluation coordinator of a largest youth-serving agency in the region appreciated ‘valuable insights and information on the youth’ in the community and on youth engagement approaches from the research. She also described her observation for positive impacts (e.g. ‘confidence and skills’) on youth leaders from her agency who have involved in the research:

As we work with youth both in our after-school program sites and as teen mentors, being part of this project has provided us with valuable insights and information on the youth in our community and how we can work with them more effectively. The youth from our organization who have involved in this project have stated that they are very pleased to be a part of it and really feel that their voices are being heard. It has added to their confidence and to date several of the participants have gone on to speak out and advocate at all government levels—municipal, provincial, and federal—for all marginalized youth. Being a part of this project has really given them confidence and skills that will serve them well throughout their lives and offers the hope that they need right now to feel successful and inspired to make a difference for themselves and others (AP #3).

Specifically, one tangible impact in the community was the role of this research in building capacity of community agencies on effective youth engagement: ‘Continued exploration of the framework builds capacity for more agencies to understand how to engage youth more effectively’ (AP #4). A programme evaluation director from a public school board concurred, ‘This project enables professional learning, community engagement, and capacity-building among stakeholders in our educational community, contributing to the process of making a real difference for our youth and families in our community’ (AP #5). The director of a government-funded community agency dedicated to ending homelessness acknowledged, ‘The project is directly relevant to our current work enhancing community capacity to address the needs of homeless and at-risk youth in our city’ (AP #6).

Also, this project’s contributions to capacity building and understanding of the ‘complex’ lives of marginalised youth reached an immigrant-serving agency:

This project addresses an important need in relation to marginalized youth—some of whom come from immigrant or refugee backgrounds. This research deepens our understanding of the complex web of factors that impact the lives of marginalized youth, and also illuminates some of the unique barriers to inclusion that are faced by those who are newcomers (AP #7).
INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADOLESCENCE AND YOUTH

Furthermore, a region-wide funding agency who coordinates collaborative efforts to address ‘complex community issues’ including poverty and education stressed the importance of learning from marginalised youth and implementing research findings to improve youth outcomes:

We work with numerous partners in order to address complex community issues, and our numerous investments support organizations and initiatives delivering a broad spectrum of services to vulnerable individuals and families. As an organization committed to reducing poverty in this region, it is imperative that we understand the challenges experienced by marginalized youth in achieving important milestones, like high-school completion, as a foundation for significantly improved outcomes in their future. The results from this project enable all of us to learn from marginalized youth and allow us the opportunity to implement our findings and improve outcomes for youth in years to come. There is a great deal of energy in our region right now to work together differently and in a much more coordinated fashion to promote better outcomes for youth. The timing for this research is terrific and we’re thrilled to be part of it! (AP #8).

More tangibly, another multicultural community agency partner suggested ‘creating a youth council’ for organisations, potentially guided by our research project to honour and incorporate a ‘youth-led perspective’ into their practice: ‘The framework and format that this project has initiated could be a good starting point towards having a youth council at many organizations in order to maintain the youth-led perspective. Maybe our youth can be a part of this?’ (AP #9).

Our community youth-serving agency partners were excited about seeing positive outcomes for high-risk youth since they are accountable for having an impact on the community, especially on vulnerable population groups including high-risk youth and their families. For example, a community programme coordinator who has known and worked with many of our youth leaders has observed tangible positive outcomes, specifically, ‘a feeling of belonging, self-confidence, and achievement’ within youth: ‘This project has already improved many things for this group of marginalized youth including, but not limited to, a feeling of belonging, self-confidence, and achievement’ (AP #9). An executive director of a community agency spoke about ‘a sense of empowerment and pride’ shown by our youth:

In our time participating in the Youth 4 YEG project, we have observed a high quality of youth participation and research activity. YEG youth leaders communicated with a sense of empowerment and pride during activities and dialogues, which focused on vital youth engagement issues (AP #1).

Youth-oriented, collaborative research processes

To produce positive outcomes in line with PYD, our research has shown that giving attention to the process factors that seem accountable for generating these outcomes is a must. Our youth leaders reminded that this is a youth-oriented and collaborative project, guided by the talents, expertise and lived experiences of the youth leaders. In particular, the specific process factors unique and vital to our project include the following: (a) honouring youth voice: ‘bottom-up process for youth by youth’; (b) co-learning and team work; (c) being flexible, adaptable and accountable for relationship-building; and (d) creating a safe, comfortable and fun space for inspirational, meaningful youth engagement.

Honouring youth voice – bottom-up process for youth by youth. First, this project honours and brings forward youth voice using a bottom-up process ‘for youth by youth’, as summarised by one youth leader: ‘I am proud to share that this project is for youth by youth. This bottom-up process gives youth a voice that they normally don’t get’ (YL #1). Specifically, our youth leaders pointed out that co-creating a framework for youth engagement was a youth-guided ‘rewarding’ (YL #1) experience to incorporate their insights:

Creating the youth engagement framework! We worked well as a team to build the framework. There was a key purpose for the bi-weekly meetings. We all had chance to input our ideas of youth engagement and what factors it entails. We gained insight from many perspectives and fellow youth leaders’ personal experiences (YL #2).

Evidently, this framework development process was guided by youth’s lived experiences: ‘We have created the framework from nothing but our own life experiences’ (YL #1). Through co-creating the framework, our youth leaders worked towards building a positive relationship while they appreciated being provided with a ‘non-judgmental’ and ‘comfortable’ space to speak up and share ideas:
As a group at the end I felt that we did a great job building our relationship, while also building our framework. I felt comfortable each and every session, and was glad that I was given a non-judgmental environment where I could speak up and share my ideas, while also learning from those around me (YL #3).

Co-learning and team work. As alluded in the last quotes above, learning from each other (i.e. co-learning) was a major attractive process for youth leaders’ gatherings: ‘This project was very unique in that it attracted both people that have learned about marginalization and “high-risk” lifestyles as well as people that have lived it. This brought with it an incredible diversity and opportunity for co-learning’ (YL #4). This youth leader further elaborated the benefit of co-learning and team work: ‘Learning so much from one another through the process. It is a very unique experience to create a tangible document of [youth engagement] framework “from scratch.” It truly shows determination and effective team work’ (YL #4). Another youth leader concurred, ‘My experience with the research project has been one that is interesting filled with great learning experiences, which I could take with me for many years to come’ (YL #3). Inspired by the desire to ‘bring about a positive change to the community’ (YL #5), learning from peer youth leaders and participants was appreciated by another youth leader: ‘Over the past year and several months of partaking in the group, I have learned so much from the youth participants and my peers’ (YL #5).

This co-learning process involved learning about both benefits/opportunities and challenges of working collaboratively:

Overall, I have been so grateful to be part of such a unique project. I learned a lot about the benefits and challenges of working collaboratively and got to meet so many interesting folks along the way. I will take this experience with me in whatever work I continue to do (YL #6).

Our youth leaders came together by sharing a common interest in youth engagement and leadership and community development: ‘Overall, I have had a good experience. I enjoyed meeting likeminded youth that were interested in leadership, working with youth, and making the community a better place’ (YL #7). Another youth leader elaborated her passion and learning about the importance of communication, hard work and helping others:

We embodied our framework, and for that reason, I really enjoyed doing my job and knew that I was doing something that I was passionate about. I began this when I was 15 years old, and later this year I will turn 18, it has been the greatest working experience I could ask for, and I learnt so much from my fellow youths. I have learnt the importance of communication, hard work and the importance of helping those around me (YL #3).

Being flexible, adaptable and accountable for relationship-building. Once completing the lengthy co-creation of a framework for youth engagement for over six months, our youth leaders pilot-tested the framework by facilitating a series of youth engagement sessions (informed by the framework) with youth participants. Despite the challenge of recruiting ‘disengaged’ youth participants, they were able to adjust and be flexible to address practical challenges:

Soon after, we started the engagement sessions with youth. We had a difficult time getting the youth to come, which in a sense was expected since we wanted to engage youth that were not engaged. We have learned to be flexible and adjust things as we go and I believe this gave the research the practical experience that we would have never foreseen (YL #1).

Another youth leader elaborated further about the importance of being flexible through effective communication to build trust and structure:

I learned that when working with high-risk, marginalized youth, one must be flexible. Communication is the key. Youth need trust in order to open up and the time it takes to build that trust may vary. Structure is important to an extent in order to garner data and results (YL #7).

In addition to the importance of flexibility to understand the unpredictable nature of youth’s lives, another key factor for effective relationship-building and trust-building involved the maintenance of accountability:
Depending on what is feasible to the members of the new group, it would be a good idea to maintain some sort of accountability or stability in order to keep the process running smoothly. Ensuring that the members who are committing to the project remain engaged is important. Stability is one of the elements of our framework and it would be important to reflect that. Flexibility and understanding of the unpredictability in each of our lives and in the lives of the youth is also something we did well and should keep an open mind about (YL #4).

Indeed, it was encouraging to see youth leaders’ observation about evidence of building a positive relationship with youth. One way of effective relationship-building was through the use of ‘debrief’ within the youth leaders’ group. It was noted that ‘we became good at debriefing and honestly voicing our thoughts and feelings. I appreciated how we were able to do this quite well near the end. It is very helpful’ (YL #4). The same youth leader stressed the importance of ‘assuring space for everyone’ openly and inclusively: ‘Assuring space for everyone was something we worked at continuously. It became important to allow everyone space to speak by not cutting the speaker off, giving a person time to respond, and listening to what was being shared’ (YL #4).

**Creating a safe, comfortable and fun space for inspirational, meaningful youth engagement.** One of the key process factors for promoting effective youth engagement and positive outcomes was to create a safe, comfortable and fun space at sessions with youth participants during a pilot-test of the framework. One youth leader described,

> We always keep communication and safety a priority and we consistently work at creating a safe and fun space for everyone and making sure everyone feels heard through the process. The fact that we had familiar faces come back every other week was very encouraging. We began to build bonds with one another, especially in the last year, making the space comfortable and fun (YL #4).

Another youth leader concurred, ‘I liked that the youth that came to the sessions had a safe, positive environment to get together with other youth and have fun. The youth that came did seem to enjoy their time there’ (YL #7).

Importantly, an essential factor for constructive and meaningful youth engagement involved the strategic use of ‘check-ins and check-outs’ (YL #2). Each session always started with check-in to get to know how each participant is doing by asking check-in questions (e.g. how have you been doing and what is a highlight of the week?) and orient the participants into the session, and ended with check-out to share their feedback on the session. We then concluded each session in a positive, encouraging way to bring everyone together on the same page and to foster enthusiasm for the next session. This point was further reiterated by another youth leader:

> I feel like check-ins and check-outs should remain a key element of our meetings. As one of the agency members mentioned at the agency meeting, everything in between check-in and check-out can be chaotic but keeping a consistent welcome and closure is important (YL #4).

This youth agency partner shared that ‘everything in between can be chaos but it is crucial to have the check-in and check-out structure to help the experience be contained and create safety’.

Furthermore, our community agency partners have directly witnessed the youth-informed process of our research through the provision of a positive, safe and responsive space for meaningful and inspirational engagement with high-risk youth. For example, a director of a community youth-serving agency commended the ‘integrity’ of our project, especially regarding its commitment to ‘identifying meaningful youth engagement processes’:

> As a community-based agency, we have been delighted to participate in their endeavours toward identifying meaningful youth engagement processes in our community. Youth 4 YEG provides opportunities for young individuals who are deemed at risk to engage in vital research and gain positive experiences in our community. We are very impressed with the integrity of Youth 4 YEG in a community climate that is experiencing ever increasing needs for youth engagement opportunities (AP #1).

Another key remark was made by the principal of a charter school that serves a large number of young people (14–19-years-old) with high-risk life conditions (e.g. poverty, homelessness, social exclusion) who have previously experienced interruptions in their formal learning:
Our students began attending the Youth 4 YEG engagement sessions in February 2014. In the weeks since their first experience, I have personally observed (through my own support in ensuring students are informed and have access to the program) an opportunity for meaningful engagement and agency that supports young people who have experienced challenging circumstances in their lives. Youth 4 YEG offers young people who would otherwise not have access to a positive space, a place to explore their own interests free from drugs, alcohol or violence (AP #4).

In fact, several students from this school have become new members of our youth leader group and have started to make an important contribution to ‘inspiring today’s youth by creating community through relationships in a fun, inclusive environment to help youth achieve obtainable success’ (i.e. new mission of Youth 4 YEG) during the current new phase of our research.

**Engagement and SJYD**

Reflective remarks by our youth leaders and community agency partners also addressed key concepts related to SJYD, specifically (a) activating the voice of youth for social/system change and (b) advancing research into action – knowledge translation and practical application.

### Activating the voice of youth for social change

A most innovative, unique aspect of our project observed by our community partners has been our strategic efforts to activate the voice of marginalised youth as the ‘driver’ of the research:

> This is a project that activates the voice of the marginalized youth that our agency serves. This project places the youth in the role of co-researcher and “driver” of the research. The key to success with this demographic is the relationships youth form with trusted workers and agencies; the youth must determine the trajectory and the outcome throughout the process (AP #2).

This community partner’s observation and suggestion are extremely important, including her point that ‘the youth must determine the trajectory and the outcome throughout the process’. To achieve this goal, building a meaningful ‘relationship’ with youth is vital although the challenges of facilitating this process should be recognised.

To reiterate these challenges, the supervisor of high-risk youth unit at a provincial government agency reminded of the importance of ‘non-judgmental’ relationship-building with youth in response to our regular update on the project:

> What youth are looking for is defined by the youth, and a theme that comes up repeatedly in my experience, and this update, is being non-judgmental. This is so important and certainly speaks to how sensitive youth are about interaction with adults that is judgmental. [In the update] the theme of peer interaction, caring and trustworthy people, and doing things in groups continues to repeat the importance of relationship at many levels, and having the ‘safety net’ in place. As adults, I think we continue to under-estimate the value youth put in the connections with adults they see as safe (AP #10).

In addition, the same agency partner acknowledged that our research project is indeed an ‘anti-oppressive practice’ in itself and that the project engages youth as ‘important contributors to a system change’, which should not be underestimated as key concepts within SJYD:

> The update does a wonderful job of capturing the thoughts of youth leaders around oppression, racism, discrimination, and stigma. Obviously, the participation of youth in all aspects of this project is an exercise in ‘anti-oppressive’ practice and speaks to how youth should not be overlooked as important contributors to a system change (AP #10).

Speaking of a system change, another community partner from a largest regional youth-serving agency not only admitted the difficulty in letting go of agency control, but she also stressed the need for ‘change’ in terms of ‘how we think of ourselves as a society’:

> We are an organization that has been around for a long time but we don’t have a youth council that can guide our program. It is difficult to let go of control, but the framework helps us do that; this helps us change how we think of ourselves as a society (AP #3).

As emphasised by this quote, our youth-informed framework of youth engagement has the potential of facilitating this social change as guided by youth.

Contextualised within a SJYD perspective, another key concept identified from our research was about the role of youth leaders as a conduit for sourcing youth views on social justice issues: ‘Youth4YEG should be the mechanism by which anyone who is interested in youth research connects to, and the
youth leaders are the conduit for sourcing/researching youth views on current social justice issues’ (AP #2). Broadly, our research project addresses significant social justice issues that influence youth (e.g. inequity, oppression, marginalisation, social exclusion), as a youth-oriented way of activating the voice of youth and mobilising youth and community partners into action for social change. An avid community partner passionately described her experiences in involving in our research project for over three and a half years, as an ‘amazing journey’:

It has truly been an amazing journey and what a pleasure it has been for me to see the changes in some of these young adults, for whom I have known for many years. Some of them have spoken to me about how they feel that they belong no matter what their background or circumstances have been in life. They are truly inspired to continue on with this work. Needless to say, the work that the youth have done on this project has been incredible, along with the expertise of community representatives, and the willingness to share their time and knowledge has also been a very positive experience to date for myself. It truly has been an invaluable experience and one that needs to continue along! (AP #3).

It was truly encouraging to hear these positive remarks on changes/transformations of youth who have been inspired by this project, as well as on providing ‘an invaluable experience’ through continuing to work with diverse community representatives.

Accordingly, more observations for activating the voice of youth for social change were provided. For example, an executive director of a high-risk youth-serving agency highlighted the importance of providing a youth-oriented space for dialogue to explore issues integral to youth’s lives with its implication to policy change:

The opportunity for them [youth] to further explore an issue that would initially appear beyond their influence, yet integral to many of their daily experiences, is encouraging. This project opens a space for dialogue for youth to express their needs in a safe and responsive environment and hopefully impact policy change (AP #2).

A project developer of a city-wide multicultural agency further elaborated the importance of ‘this participatory way of work from the ground-up’ in working with stakeholders to facilitate change at multiple levels:

It brings marginalized youth together with a wide range of stakeholders so that an effective and meaningful framework for engagement is co-created and articulated. This participatory way of work from the ‘ground-up’ resonates closely with our sense of what is needed and what will be effective. In recent years, the families and community leaders we work closely with have been expressing concern about the effects of exclusion and marginalization on newcomer youth as well as on those who are born here who are at risk of being marginalized. Engaging those who are marginalized is a very present and urgent matter for the communities we work with. And undertaking research to develop a framework for effective engagement that can be shared is an important endeavour. We notice that participatory methods being employed are respectful, effective and productive. We observe that youths are invited to explore and articulate the nature of their lived experience as it relates to the ways of engaging them that is most relevant and effective. As this information is shared with a wide range of stakeholders—from service providers to researchers to policy makers—there is a real potential for change at the community, service sector, and system levels (AP #7).

**Advancing research into action: Knowledge translation and practical application**

More specifically, our community partners have spoken about implications of our project for knowledge translation and practical application to advance research into action. This notion was nicely captured by a community partner who works with hundreds of ethno-cultural youths:

This research advances the understanding of effective Knowledge Translation (KT), improves the practice of KT, and supports the use of research evidence in decision-making not only for our organization and partners but also for the youth we work for, as its discoveries will lead to practical applications. We see this as an excellent opportunity for community-based and youth-driven research to have an impact on other institutions working with, or considering working with, youth in the community, and as a crucial next-step in advancing research into action (AP #9).

A community service coordinator from the municipal government stressed the importance of ‘usability’ to have an impact on practice and policy at system levels and sharing of youth-informed knowledge with ‘allied systems’:

Use of a participatory action framework in this project ensures active engagement of marginalized youth to give them a voice towards improving youth outcomes. Usability is important and so, this project involves the application of the knowledge, capacities, resources and experiences gained from these youths in order to see positive impact on
practices, policy and systems to better support youth living in marginalized conditions. As a partner involved in this collective effort, we continue to reflect upon and share this knowledge within our own and allied systems (AP #11).

She recognised the potential of our project to mobilise and bring forward the voice of youth into the transformation of policy, practice and systems, using a ‘participatory action framework’. Also, remarks were made by another community partner on the guiding research question of this project and its implication for ‘knowledge transfer to support policy and programming’:

To examine the unfolding question: How can practices and policies around engagement at personal, social, and community levels be changed to enhance youth’s capacity to mobilize the resources needed to promote youth development?, specifically, as it relates to youth in high risk conditions can contribute to the knowledge transfer needed by government, especially, to support policy and programming that will have impact on youth with complex needs (AP #2).

Attractiveness to having an impact on policy and practice was echoed by the executive director of a community agency committed to ending homelessness, who appreciated ‘the use of a collaborative, participatory approach with youth and the focus on developing effective youth engagement strategies to inform policy and practice’. She stressed,

As an organization, we depend on community-based, participatory processes to develop strategies for addressing homelessness and related issues in our community. Being able to draw on the knowledge and practical expertise of youth with lived experience strengthens our ability to serve this population in a meaningful and effective manner (AP #6).

Furthermore, a senior administrator from local school systems emphasised this project’s synergy with the school district’s vision for ‘improving the lives and opportunities for marginalized youth through working with community organizations’. She also valued the role of participatory action research in empowering youth and facilitating positive change and growth for youth:

This project is very much in keeping with our District’s vision for educating our young people. We have a keen interest in improving the lives and opportunities for marginalized youth through working with community organizations to better facilitate the support and direct aid that many of our youth require in order to survive. The use of a participatory action research approach empowers the participants and leads to sustained change and growth in programs that support them. We are a part of this collaborative project to engage targeted youth in conversations about their futures as a means of enabling them to become part of the process of positive change (AP #12).

A municipal government’s community coordinator enthusiastically mentioned the strengths of our project that ‘builds upon and enhances the capacity of youth to influence systems and services for the benefit of vulnerable youth and empower these youths to find their voice and to make a difference!’ (AP #11). Importantly, the last couple of quotes above seemed to convey key messages that integrate PYD and SJYD holistically.

Conclusion
Youth participation and engagement is viewed as a strategy for youth development, social justice and effective citizenry (Lerner & Overton, 2008; Zeldin, Krauss, Collura, Lucchesi, & Sulaiman, 2014). In particular, ‘SJYD influences young people’s critical perspectives and willingness to engage in social change actions’ (Cammarota, 2011, p. 835). In line with the findings described in this article, Ross (2011) stressed the importance of ‘youth-inspired community change’ – ‘Rather than adults continue to push for the change on behalf of the youth, inclusion of SJYD framework should be looked at as a way to sustain youth’s energy and motivation to stay involved over the long haul’ (p. 699).

Overall, the voices of our youth leaders and community agency partners in our research project support the integration/blending of PYD and SJYD (Cammarota, 2011; Ross, 2011), based on reflections on their experiences with being involved in the project. Meaningful, inspirational youth engagement facilitated by youth leadership was highlighted as a key mechanism for promoting PYD and SJYD. First, the key PYD-related concepts identified include the following: (1) strengths-based empowering approach to youth engagement, (2) capacity building and positive outcomes for youth and youth-serving agencies, as well as (3) youth-oriented, collaborative research processes (e.g. honouring youth voice: ‘bottom-up process for youth by youth’, co-learning and team work) that enable the promotion of these positive outcomes. On the other hand, the key SJYD-related concepts identified were as follows: (a) activating
the voice of youth for social/system change and (b) advancing research into action – knowledge translation and practical application. Rather than treating PYD and SJYD separately, this article illustrated mutually reinforcing roles of PYD and SJYD. Importantly, these roles in our research were facilitated by the strategic use of youth leadership in promoting effective youth engagement. Specifically, the contributions of our youth leaders to the process of engaging high-risk, marginalised youth were shown to be vital to promoting PYD and SJYD, along with supportive, background roles of community partners.

In particular, the strategic use of youth leadership with the support of community partners/stakeholders seems essential to facilitating social/systems changes in order to more effectively inspire and support marginalised youth who are at high-risk of a variety of life challenges. The power of youth in mobilising systems/social changes should not be underestimated. Our community-based research project demonstrated the significance of youth leadership and engagement as a powerful mechanism for PYD and SJYD.

Note
1. To protect confidentiality and anonymity of our youth leaders (YL) and agency partners (AP), their identifications are coded as YL #1 to #7 and AP #1 to #12 in this article.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor
Yoshitaka Iwasaki is Professor and Associate Dean, Research in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta. His research interests include culture, diversity, and community engagement; active living and quality of life; and participatory action research (PAR) and capacity-building. He has over 75 refereed journal articles and over $5 million in research funding.

References
Alicea, S., Pardo, G., Conover, K., Gopalan, G., & McKay, M. (2012). Step-up: Promoting youth mental health and development in inner-city high schools. Clinical Social Work Journal, 40, 175–186.
Blanchet-Cohen, N., & Salazar, J. (2009). Empowering practices for working with marginalized youth. Relational Child & Youth Care Practice, 22, 5–15.
Caine, V., & Boydell, K. (2010). Composing lives: Listening and responding to marginalized youth. Education Canada, 50, 42–45.
Cammarota, J. (2011). From hopelessness to hope: Social justice pedagogy in urban education and youth development. Urban Education, 46, 828–844.
Commission on Positive Youth Development. (2005). The positive perspective on youth development. In D. L. Evans, E. B. Foa, R. E. Gur, H. Hendin, C. P. O’Brien, M. E. P. Seligman, & T. Walsh (Eds.), Treating and preventing adolescent mental health disorders: What we know and what we don’t know: A research agenda for improving the mental health of our youth (pp. 497–527). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Creswell, J. W. (1998). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Curran, A., Bowness, E., & Comack, E. (2010). Meeting the needs of youth: Perspectives from youth-serving agencies. Winnipeg: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives-Manitoba.
Davidson, J., Wien, S., & Anderson, K. (2010). Creating a provincial family council to engage youth and families in child & youth mental health systems. Journal of the Canadian Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 19, 169–175.
Delgado, M. (2002). New frontiers for youth development in the twenty-first century: Revitalizing and broadening youth development. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
Durlak, J. A., Taylor, R. D., Kawashima, K., Pachan, M. K., DuPre, E. P., Celio, C. I., … Weissberg, R. P. (2007). Effects of positive youth development programs on school, family, and community systems. American Journal of Community Psychology, 39, 269–286.
Ersing, R. L. (2009). Building the capacity of youths through community cultural arts: A positive youth development perspective. Best Practice in Mental Health, 5, 26–43.
Geldhof, G. J., Bowers, E. P., & Lerner, R. M. (2013). Special section introduction: Thriving in context: Findings from the 4-H study of positive youth development. Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 42(1), 1–5.
Gharabaghi, K., & Anderson-Nathe, B. (2012). In search of new ideas. Child & Youth Services, 33(1), 1–4.
Ginwright, S., & Cammarota, J. (2002). New terrain in youth development: The promise of a social justice approach. Social Justice, 29, 82–95.
Ginwright, S., & James, T. (2002). From assets to agents of change: Social justice, organizing, and youth development. *New Directions for Youth Development, 96*, 27–46.

Hodges, S., Ferreira, K., & Israel, N. (2012). “If we’re going to change things, it has to be systemic.” Systems change in children’s mental health. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 49*, 526–537.

Iwasaki, Y. (2014). Reflection on learnings from engaging and working with high-risk, marginalized youth. *Relational Child & Youth Care Practice, 27*, 24–35.

Iwasaki, Y., Springett, J., Dashora, P., McLaughlin, A. M., McHugh, T. L., & Youth 4 YEG Team. (2014). Youth-guided youth engagement: Participatory action research (PAR) with high-risk, marginalized youth. *Child & Youth Services, 35*, 316–342.

Lerner, R. M., & Overton, W. F. (2008). Exemplifying the integrations of the relational developmental system: Synthesizing theory, research, and application to promote positive development and social justice. *Journal of Adolescent Research, 23*, 245–255.

Lind, C. (2008). Knowledge development with adolescents in a PAR process. *Educational Action Research, 16*, 221–233.

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ramey, H. L., Busseri, M. A., Khanna, N., & Rose-Krasnor, L. (2010). Youth engagement and suicide risk: Testing a mediated model in a Canadian community sample. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence, 39*, 243–258.

Richards-Schuster, K., & Aldana, A. (2013). Learning to speak out about racism: Youths’ insights on participation in an intergroup dialogues program. *Social Work With Groups, 36*, 332–348.

Ross, L. (2011). Sustaining youth participation in a long-term tobacco control initiative: Consideration of a social justice perspective. *Youth & Society, 43*, 681–704.

Smyth, P., & Eaton-Erickson, A. (2009). Making the connection: Strategies for working with high-risk youth. In S. McKay, D. Fuchs, & I. Brown (Eds.), *Passion for action in child and family services: Voices from the prairies* (pp. 119–142). Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center.

Suleiman, A., Soleimanpour, S., & London, J. (2006). Youth action for health through youth-led research. *Journal of Community Practice, 14*, 125–145.

Wexler, L. M., DiFluvio, G., & Burke, T. K. (2009). Resilience and marginalized youth: Making a case for personal and collective meaning-making as part of resilience research in public health. *Social Science and Medicine, 69*, 565–570.

Wilson, N., Minkler, M., Dasho, S., Carrillo, R., Wallerstein, N., & Garcia, D. (2006). Training students as facilitators in the youth empowerment strategies (yes!) project. *Journal of Community Practice, 14*, 201–217.

Yohalem, N., & Martin, S. (2007). Building the evidence base for youth engagement: Reflections on youth and democracy. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*, 807–810.

Zahradnik, M. M., Stewart, S. H., O’Connor, R. M., Stevens, D., Ungar, M., & Wekerle, C. (2010). Resilience moderates the relationship between exposure to violence and posttraumatic reexperiencing in Mi’kmaq youth. *International Journal of Mental Health & Addiction, 8*, 408–420.

Zeldin, S., Krauss, S. E., Collura, J., Lucchesi, M., & Sulaiman, A. H. (2014). Conceptualizing and measuring youth–adult partnership in community programs: A cross national study. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 54*, 337–347.