

Understanding youth empowerment: a youth participatory action research approach

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Qualitative
Research in
Organizations and
Management: An
International
Journal

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Received 21 July 2023
Revised 31 January 2024
23 May 2024
Accepted 27 May 2024

Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this study is two-fold: (1) to promote a model of youth participatory research and offer a window of understanding into how it can be enacted and (2) to understand youth perspectives on youth empowerment. This study asks: “how can youth help us understand youth empowerment?”

Design/methodology/approach – The study applies youth participatory action research (YPAR) and interpretative phenomenological analysis. The study illustrates how to enact a model of YPAR by engaging youth in the process of research in a youth-serving community non-profit organization.

Findings – This study sets out to make two important contributions, one methodological and one theoretical: First, the study contributes to our understanding of the opportunities and benefits of youth-engaged, peer-to-peer research. Specifically, this study promotes a model of youth participatory action research and knowledge making processes, and the associated social and formal benefits for youth. By extension, this study illustrates an approach to engage youth in formal contexts which has implications for both management and organizational studies and education. Finally, the study extends our understanding and conceptualization of the phenomenon of youth empowerment (as informed by youth perspectives).

Originality/value – The study offers insight into how to conduct youth participatory action research and specifically how to address two limitations cited in the literature: (1) how to authentically engage youth including how to share power, and (2) how to perform youth participatory action research, often critiqued as a black box methodology.

Keywords Youth participatory action research, Youth empowerment, Interpretive phenomenological analysis, Community non-profit organizations, Youth

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

I'm so lucky to have been part of this group and have [had] the opportunity to meet people like me in a room with a common purpose ~ Youth Researcher.

This study sets out to make two important contributions, one methodological and one theoretical: First, this study contributes to our understanding of the opportunities and benefits of youth-engaged, peer-to-peer research. Specifically, this study promotes a model of youth participatory action research and knowledge making processes, and the associated



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Qualitative Research in
Organizations and Management:
An International Journal
Vol. 19 No. 5, 2024
pp. 1-34
Emerald Publishing Limited
1746-5648
DOI 10.1108/QROM-07-2023-2561

social and formal benefits for youth. By extension, this study illustrates an approach to engage youth in formal contexts which has implications for both management and organizational studies and education. Finally, the study extends our understanding and conceptualization of the phenomenon of youth empowerment (as informed by youth perspectives). This study sets out to engage youth authentically in research about issues that matter to them. Guiding this study is the research question: How can youth help us understand youth empowerment?

To support a larger study with a methodological aim of exploring youth participatory action research, a research lab was created, nested inside a community-based non-profit organization [1] in partnership with a Canadian university and the government's provincial Department of Education. The non-profit organization has a youth-focused research and education mandate.

The research lab provides an opportunity for youth (ages 15–18, in grades 11 or 12) to learn and engage in research (using a peer-to-peer approach) and to collect and analyze qualitative data on issues that matter to youth. Topics of study are informed by youth. While participating in the research lab, students earn a full high school credit through a co-operative education program. Therefore, it is important to understand that the research lab featured in this study is both a scholarly research site hosted within a formal organizational context (with a mission, vision and purpose), and a developmental and educational program for youth (stewarded in collaboration with formal educational partners).

The methodological approach outlined in this paper is novel, not only in the terms of the context for the study and the formation of a youth-focused research lab, but in the opportunity to gain insights into youth empowerment both from the youth participants and the youth researchers themselves (by virtue of their developmental and educational experience in the research lab). By extension, this paper shares data on the first study in the research lab, which explores the phenomenon of youth empowerment. The current study is building on this initial study and is exploring youth engagement. The next study will be exploring youth unemployment and underemployment. Each study has been inspired by the last and has involved collaboration with youth and stakeholders with youth serving agendas.

This paper is organized in the following way. First, I will provide an overview of the praxis orientation to the research and where the study enters the scholarly conversation by citing the relevant literatures, focusing on youth empowerment, youth participatory action research and interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). In so doing, I provide a rationale for this approach. Then, I will outline the methodological approach by providing a description of the research context and specifically the set up of the research lab in a community non-profit organization. In this section, I also discuss the motivations and objectives for the research lab and how the research lab advances the community non-profit organization's core mission, vision and purpose. I then delve into the unique challenges and opportunities with involving youth in research. These sections provide insight into how the research had to be structured for the methodological approach to be enacted. I also take this opportunity to share insights from the youth researchers on their experience in the research lab so that readers may understand their journey and the impact the experience had on them. In the analysis (entitled IPA in Action), I review how we enacted IPA and specifically how this manifested in various steps, drawing on [Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez \(2011\)](#). In the findings section (entitled Insights from the Research), I share the data across two stages: (1) theorizing empowerment and (2) emic insights from the youth. I conclude this section with crucial takeaways from developing a successful YPAR model. In the discussion, I engage with the implications for youth participatory action research, the literature on youth empowerment and both management

and organizational studies and education. I conclude by returning to the research question and sharing the next steps for the research lab [2].

2. Entering the scholarly conversation

In this section, I review the relevant literatures while also outlining the praxis orientation of the research. I begin by outlining the community and personal drivers for the research. I proceed by explaining the entry points in the literature related to youth and youth empowerment. I conclude this section by providing literature primers on youth participatory action research and interpretive phenomenological analysis.

2.1 Praxis orientation

A study on youth empowerment was inspired by conversations with youth and those invested in youth. In this case, that included partners of the community-based non-profit organization (and their network of youth serving organizations and the youth they serve), plus the provincial government's Department of Education (and youth in schools). As I will expand on later in this paper, youth recruited to the research lab in the capacity of youth researchers had the opportunity to help develop the research questions and subsequent cohorts have driven the next subjects of study. For example, the current study is on youth engagement and these same stakeholders were consulted about the subject, whilst the youth in the research lab developed the research questions to explore the phenomenon with their peers. Youth empowerment is also a primary focus of the community-based non-profit organization that hosts the research lab. I will elaborate on the organizational context of the research in [section 3.1](#) The Research Lab.

As lead researcher, I set out to determine where a contribution could be made in a study on youth empowerment. I identified two potential contributions/gaps. The first is that youth empowerment is not well understood (practically, conceptually and theoretically) and youth perspectives on youth empowerment are limited. The second is that youth are rarely involved in the research process, and I was interested in exploring a model of youth participatory action research in which youth could study subjects that mattered to youth. I also uncovered in my literature review that co-creating knowledge in this way is challenging and how to employ participatory action research is not well understood and often context specific. Thus, I felt that this research could offer "a window of understanding" ([Ponzoni, 2016](#), p. 559) into a research process involving youth, and designed for and about youth.

Finding inspiration for studying youth, ages 15–18 was not difficult. I am the mother of two boys (15 and 17 years old), both of whom are grappling with their own identity work, contemplating their futures and rebounding from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to my personal motivations, I am co-located in both the non-profit organization and at the partnered Canadian University [3]. In 2021, I helped launch the non-profit with a youth-focused mission. I was specifically interested in serving youth and supporting youth-serving organizations with a novel research and development mandate; maximizing the skills and expertise I could bring to a youth-focused agenda. With the support of funding partners, I found both the organizational mandate and resource capacity to undertake a program of research to explore youth-related issues, starting with youth empowerment.

2.2 Youth empowerment

2.2.1 Empowerment. In my literature review of empowerment, I realized the study of empowerment is complex and operates across many subfields including sociology,

psychology, social work, neurosciences and organizational studies (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010). It has strong ties to social justice and achieving personal agency, and power. Empowerment seeks to increase personal and political power to achieve individual and collective transformation (Carr, 2003). A critique of current empowerment models is that they presuppose that those who need empowering are subjugated by those who are empowered and thus cannot empower themselves (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019).

Empowerment has been theorized in research and practice as an interactive process with practical applications. It is considered central to the improvement of the human condition, often revealing environmental, social, economic or political inequities. However, empowerment lacks conceptual clarity. It can be defined as a process of increasing personal and interpersonal power and influence, achieving both personal and collective efficacy. Understood as a processional concept, it involves progress against a stated goal in which personal power is increased and thus involves self-efficacy, knowledge and competence (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010). Some models of empowerment also see power as embedded in social relationships, social networks and supportive groups, therefore linking it to collective as well as personal behaviour (Wilson *et al.*, 2010). In a collective model, empowerment becomes attached to larger social systems, community building and relational action, including consciousness-raising.

Further, the convention on the Rights of the Child includes economic arguments for youth inclusion for improvements in education and health and livelihood. Empowered youth are more likely to be creative, productive and engaged. Thus, models of empowerment can be drawn upon to consider how to engage youth in such processes and activities (Sebba *et al.*, 2009). Youth models of empowerment include concepts such as mastery, agency, self-efficacy, self-determination and self-regulation. However, where youth are concerned, it often also includes a subset of goals that are personally meaningful and power oriented. NESTA (the UK National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts) suggests that empowering youth can be enabled by a number of strategies, including: (1) seeing positive images in the media, (2) providing structures and supports for development, (3) providing access to supportive networks and mentors, (4) educating enabling adults, (5) providing space and place for youth to explore and be challenged and (6) recognizing and celebrating their achievements. As you will note in section 5.3, many of these empowering requirements were also crucial in building a successful model of youth participatory action research as described herein.

It is useful to consider the following definition of youth empowerment, starting with the understanding that empowerment involves progress, achieved over time and resulting in increased personal power and influence:

The concept of youth empowerment is a widely viewed one, but comprehensively it involves developing the capacity of youth to take control of their development through ensuring an enabling environment for individual and collective youth inclusion and active participation in civil, political, economic, social and cultural aspects of society. Going by this meaning, youth empowerment will support youth in improving their wellbeing, as well as making valuable contributions to development in their communities. (Ogamba, 2019, pp. 270–271)

Studying youth empowerment is not only compelling, it is also incredibly timely as youth are experiencing unprecedented mental and emotional distress (Marchini *et al.*, 2021). Now more than ever, they need access to positive and hopeful outlets and they need activated agency and inspiration to facilitate both their growth, resiliency and positive adaptation (Walsh, 2020). Youth empowerment is an essential element of a meaningful life and as a way for youth to take charge of their own futures. In a period of time when youth have been required to adapt to complicated losses and new approaches to learning and

living and meaning-making (Walsh, 2020), this study brings a youth perspective to understanding the conditions necessary for youth to feel empowered, resilient, ready to cope and meet the demands of the world around them and the confidence to address future uncertainty.

2.2.2 Youth. Youth between the ages of 15–18 are part of a demographic often referred to as generational alpha. By 2025, there will be an estimated two billion generation alpha youth. They will be the largest demographic on the planet. In terms of management and organizational studies, this generation is already shaping the social media landscape, popular culture, brand influence and purchasing power. They have been referred to as a *digital everything* generation (Gartshore, 2018), completely immersed in technology (The Annie E Casey Foundation, 2020). They are setting new cultural norms and patterns for how we learn and communicate (Sramová and Pavelka, 2023). They are finding their voices and advocating for their futures, and they have already been influencing public discourse on a range of issues from the climate crisis to Truth and Reconciliation, from BlackLivesMatter to LGBTQIA2S+. Equity matters to this generation. Current research also indicates that youth's information consumption behaviours, including their ability to credibly assess and evaluate information are influencing their cognitive development and decision making in crucial ways (Metzger *et al.*, 2015). By the end of the 2020s they will be moving into adulthood, the workforce and households of their own (Gartshore, 2018). COVID 19 has fundamentally reset society norms and further intensified this generation's awareness of their role in re-imagining the world around them and their place in it (The Annie E Casey Foundation, 2020).

The development of youth has also been greatly impacted by COVID 19, including social development, resilience and preparedness to face the dynamic nature of future life (Masten *et al.*, 2021). One approach to studying resilience as a dimension of empowerment is to study good adaptation (Masten, 2014). Positive psychology encourages the perspective that wellbeing is attainable when individuals can be nurtured for their unique strengths and virtues and engaged meaningfully. Happiness, hope, resilience and positive mental health have a predictive and positive relationship in high school aged youth (Lenz, 2021). Generation alpha is also still *arriving* and therefore they are a very interesting age group to engage with and learn from. I was also keen to find out how we empower this generation to be a part of the change they wish to see, to foster their engagement in a range of activities and to find ways for them to feel empowered and to empower others.

2.3 Youth participatory action research

In my effort to confront these aforementioned notions of who has power, I adopted an approach wherein youth were empowered through the research process, working as a collective, to study empowerment and co-creating our experience in the research lab. I attempted to engage with youth in a meaningful way to explore youth empowerment (by talking to other youth), whilst exploring their own empowerment (as youth researchers learning about and performing research).

Youth participated in the project in two ways which are central to the research design: (1) being interviewed as participants, and (2) serving as peer researchers. I define peer research herein as youth from our target population training as a researcher and serving in the role of peer researcher by conducting qualitative interviews to learn more about the experiences and opinions of the youth around them. The youth researchers also shared their own experiences of doing research and how this made them feel. I share some of those insights in the methodology section (3.0).

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) “empowers youth to engage in social change through studying issues that are meaningful and important to them” (Keddie, 2021, p. 381).

In the case of this study, youth were engaged to think critically about the social phenomenon of empowerment and to investigate youth perspectives (personal ideas and experiences). Central to our effort was to place youth in a co-creation and co-leadership role on the project with empowering and emancipatory intentions (Keddie, 2021; Ponzoni, 2016). In YPAR, youth and adults work together to examine a social problem and contemplate what can be changed and improved for the better with potential implications for society (Malorni *et al.*, 2022; Ponzoni, 2016). YPAR accepts as a starting point that youth are a socially marginalized identity and YPAR is thus a powerful process that can positively alter individuals, organizations and communities (Malorni *et al.*, 2022).

The traditional methods of participatory action research involve connecting with individuals who experience a certain form of oppression and then collectively with this social group, make them insiders to the knowledge making process of research (Malorni *et al.*, 2022). Fundamental to the process is sharing power, which requires critical consciousness (critical thinking about assumptions, beliefs, feelings and ideas) as critical consciousness is inextricably linked to critical action (transforming the self and societal norms) (Malorni *et al.*, 2022). Adding “youth” to “participatory action research” requires problematizing the typical societal conception of youth as a socially constructed and marginalized identity and as such, YPAR researchers must recognize that youth have power and agency (Malorni *et al.*, 2022).

We're able to come together for a common purpose and work together to make positive change ~ Youth Researcher.

YPAR as an emancipatory praxis, enables youth to be decision makers, to be authentically involved and honours youth-centered approaches and contributions (Malorni *et al.*, 2022). As stated earlier in this paper, part of the contribution of this paper is to offer a *window of understanding*. Malorni *et al.* (2022) building on work by Anyon *et al.* (2018) in their scoping review of YPAR studies found that 43% of YPAR studies fail to explain how the process of YPAR is facilitated. Instead, the research design is a “black box” (p. 2). One of the main critiques and questions that extends from this observation is to what extent are young people engaged in the process itself and at what stages? Very few studies appear to involve youth at the analytical stage (11% as cited in Malorni *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, I will take time in these next sections to explain my approach in detail. However, first, I will explain the form of analysis we undertook, namely Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis or IPA by offering foundation insights from the literature.

2.4 Interpretive phenomenological analysis

As the research ethics application needed to be completed prior to youth researchers joining the research lab, I had to select a form of analysis that I felt comfortable with, that I could teach youth to use and that would complement YPAR and the goal of emancipatory praxis. I selected Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) because it met certain criteria both for the success of the study (developing new knowledge about youth empowerment), as well as opportunities arising from working with youth researchers (tapping into their emic knowledge of the world and youth experience). I also felt a degree of confidence that my young research team would understand the approach in action (though many joked it was difficult to pronounce).

IPA can be used to help understand how participants make sense of their experiences, the social world around them and their own ideas. It is epistemologically anchored in emancipatory theorizing and social inquiry, and recognizes that the realities of lived experiences can result in new theorizing and thus contribute to liberating ideas, social mobilization and the challenging of dominant narratives and the process of knowledge production (Quan, 2013). A phenomenological approach fosters the exploration and

discovery of insights to influence and change the existential condition for youth with an appreciation for their context as generation alpha. The approach is informed by both lived experience and embodied knowledge (Quan, 2013). In this case, the embodied knowledge reflects both the youth researchers and the youth participants.

Though we did not have time in the Lab to unpack ontology, epistemology and axiology, we did emphasize the fundamental considerations of qualitative research and the importance of first voice and individual insights generated from lived experience (vs generalizable findings) (Amis and Silk Michael, 2008). Ultimately, I understood that I would be engaging youth in my own paradigmatic tradition, whilst employing approaches that would help them understand research. My biggest fear was that by focusing on method, I would reduce the potential insights from a deeper reading of context and situatedness (Cunliffe, 2011). However, I felt that with IPA, I could achieve both an agreement with my own onto-epistemological framing with an approach to research that students could also find accessible. I also felt that the approach was appropriately rigorous (Harley and Cornelissen, 2022).

IPA allowed us to generate data around a particular social phenomenon (youth empowerment) by concentrating on the personal ideas, perspectives and experiences of youth. IPA is very subject centered. As a result, I understood that the data would be anchored in the participants' subjectivities, communicated through narrative and likely represent incomplete reflections of their experience (Hayes *et al.*, 2016). I also understood how important it was to bring the youth researchers' own emic understandings into our approach and analysis. IPA is an approach that promotes self-awareness as an important aspect of the process of engaging with participants. Therefore, the youth researchers were encouraged to take stock of their own experiences and their own interpretations whilst researching. Some of our insights relate to how the research team felt about researching empowerment and of course, their own reading of the data they collected.

3. Methodological approach

3.1 The research lab

The research lab has been really, really rewarding . . . it has opened my mind to a whole different perspective, and it just taught me a lot. It's just been really great ~ Youth Researcher.

The research lab, herein referred to as the Lab was set up with five program objectives: (1) collect effective data on issues that matter to youth, (2) use a peer-to-peer research approach, (3) teach high school students to become researchers, (4) allow students to experience a co-operative learning program that earns them a high school credit and (5) allow students to explore career futures involving research. The Lab is nested inside a community non-profit organization with a youth-focused research and education mandate. Specifically, the mission and mandate of the organization is to support the inclusive development and empowerment of youth through research and knowledge mobilization. The organization has a vision of increasing youth engagement and equity, and values self-belief, autonomy, empathy, compassion and both independence and interdependence. The organization has three pillars of core activities (1) primary research, (2) educational program development, (3) supporting other youth-serving organizations with capacity development. The Lab is a key program of the organization in fulfilling its mission and serves to engage youth directly and meaningfully in the work of the organization. The organization is keen to amplify the wisdom of youth in developing strategies to support their positive development. In response to concerns raised that youth require better information literacy skills including information evaluation processes and credibility assessment skills (Metzger *et al.*, 2015), it is useful to think of the Lab as both a research lab and a developmental opportunity for youth. As a

developmental program, the Lab can be described in part, as a context-driven, information literacy intervention program that promotes evidence-based approaches, critical thinking and advocacy. The Lab experience endeavours to instill the skills necessary for thoughtful engagement with information sources while building transferable skills that will serve youth in school, work and life. Activities in the Lab balance curiosity with discernment and build vital foundational capabilities that empower youth.

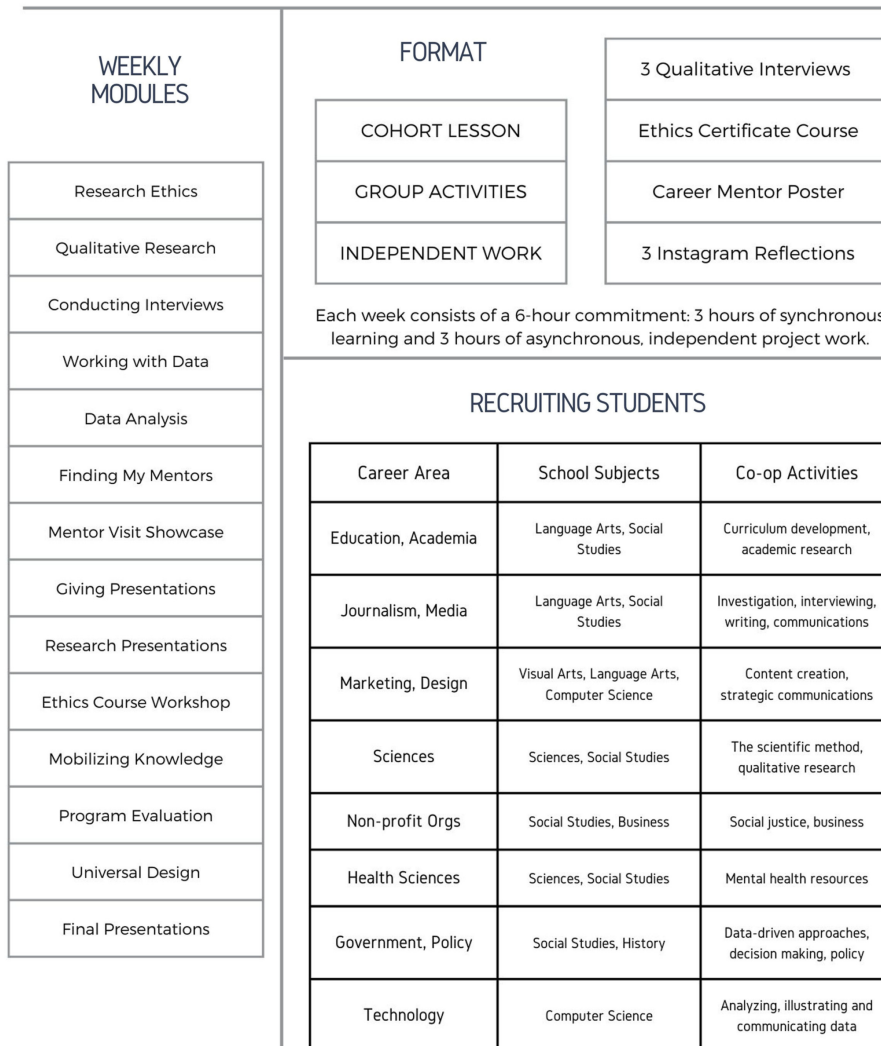
To configure the Lab and recruit students as researchers, I worked closely with the government's Department of Education. As a result, the Lab became an approved host site for the co-operative learning program. As such, the Lab had to meet objectives set by the department and these include providing youth with real-world, career-ready skills and opportunities to integrate classroom learning, personal interests and personal goals with experiential learning outside of the classroom. Students enrolled in the co-operative education program receive mentorship both from their school and from organizational leaders at their placement. They are placed in authentic community settings which allow them to explore various career pathways and these opportunities are selected in consultation with schoolteachers, youth pathway consultants and guidance counsellors. Additionally, I set out to align the Lab's development experience with Atlantic Canada Framework for Essential Graduation Competencies and the program contributes to all six of the skills and components from Active Citizenship to Communication, to Critical Thinking to Personal-Career Development and more [4].

To set up the Lab as an approved community host for co-operative learning program there was a typical vetting process, including approval by the Department of Education for the proposed co-operative activities. There were also site visits and a risk assessment. In this case, I used the ethics application through our partnered university to explore associated risks and implications for involving youth in research (both as researchers and participants) and shared these insights with the department. I further developed a sequence of modules to help prepare the youth to become competent and confident researchers (see [Figure 1](#) Lab Recruitment). Additionally, I brought to the project my experience of working with youth, working in community organizations that serve youth and my background in research. It is important to note that I have a co-appointment with both the partnered university and the community non-profit organization which helped facilitate the set up this program. This is not a requirement to enact YPAR, but these partnerships enabled this particular model. It also speaks to some of the complexity of doing YPAR research.

Upon my first visit to the Lab, I heard firsthand from students who spoke confidently about their experience, sharing specific examples of their learning and growth ~ Department of Education Representative.

[The Lab] encourages students to explore their personal interests, fostering creativity, curiosity, and self-discovery. This approach prepares students to make informed decisions about their future academic and career paths. [Personal pronoun] mentorship and guidance have instilled confidence and readiness in the students ~ School Board Representative.

Students voluntarily signed up to join the Lab as one of their co-operative learning opportunities. Teachers approached prospective students. I prepared communications about the study and the Lab to help explain the opportunity to teachers, parents, guidance counsellors, youth pathway consultants and students. Specifically, I provided in-depth information about the Lab's experience, including an overview of the week-by-week schedule of modules and some insights into what subject areas and career areas matched with the cooperative activities available in the Lab. In addition to the weekly modules, the Lab also featured visits from career mentors from various industries and professions who all use research, data and evidence in their day-to-day. This gave



Source(s): Authors work

Figure 1.
Lab recruitment

students insights into various career futures associated with the skills they were learning in the Lab.

The students in the Lab attend high school in Atlantic Canada. The Lab is one of three or four cooperative placements they might undertake within a variety of businesses and organizational environments in grades 11 and 12. These cooperative placements are considered *career exploration activities* and thus the sites and activities vary significantly. Students are meant to use these learning opportunities to consider various career pathways. Therefore, some of the opportunities will be a strong fit with their interests and aptitudes, whilst other opportunities may help rule out potential future paths. Each co-operative

placement involves a commitment of 80 h. To see some reflections on what youth felt that they learned in the Lab see [Figure 2: Reflecting on Critical Lessons](#).

The data presented in this study spans two cohorts in the Lab (a cohort of eight students in Fall, 2022 and a cohort of seven students in Winter, 2023) (see [Figure 3 Cohort A](#), and [Figure 4 Cohort B](#)). From inception to start up, this process of setting up the Lab and recruiting the first cohort, took one year. Idea generation and conversations with the Department of Education began in the Fall of 2021 and the first cohort launched in Fall of 2022. Though the process was not difficult, it involved several stages including planning within the community non-profit organization, liaising and planning with the Department of Education, university ethics application process and then ultimately devising the experience in the Lab through to recruitment of students. Because the project was novel and I was working with both youth in the role of researchers and youth as subjects and external partners, the ethics application took several rounds of review.

Certainly, I could have made other choices to conduct this research and arguably setting up a Lab and training youth to interview other youth was not the easiest way to do it. However, I believed that engaging youth would be rewarding, appropriate given the mandate of the organization, and that it would also lead to richer data. However, I did not appreciate how much of an impact the experience would have on the youth in the Lab. As one of our researcher's stated:

I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with amazing peers and researchers. They have all shown me how important it is to have youth sharing their ideas, views, and work in research. This has been an incredible adventure being able to conduct research that directly contributes to us all. I am sad to say goodbye. It has been a life changing experience ~ Youth Researcher.

The Lab has become more than it set out to be – it is more than a research lab and more than a developmental program. It has become a special place for youth, where studying empowerment, also means becoming empowered through the deep personal exploration of

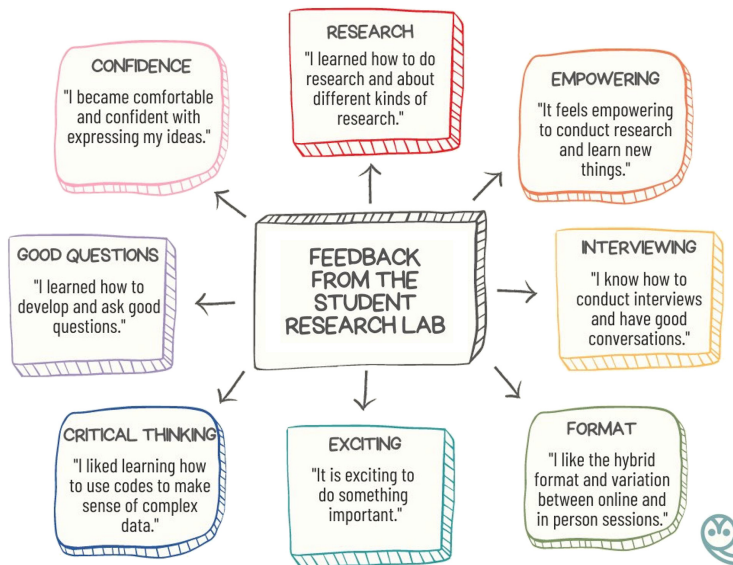
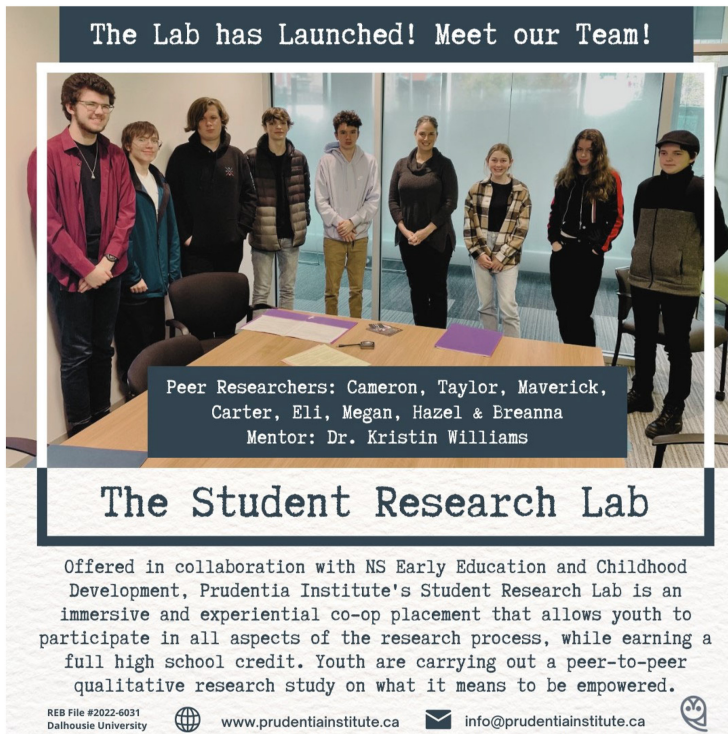


Figure 2.
Reflecting on critical lessons

Source(s): Authors work



Source(s): Authors work

Figure 3.
Cohort A

self and others. The benefits have become difficult to calculate and difficult to describe. As a result, I will share quotes from the youth researchers in the next sections so that you can see how they made sense of their experiences in the Lab. This feedback spans the first three cohorts in the Lab. I also summarize youth feedback in [Figure 5: Feedback from Youth](#).

3.2 Youth conducting research with youth

Working in the Lab has definitely made me feel more confident, at least in like the lab setting. And we all have, like, strengths that are like complementary to other people's strengths ~ Youth Researcher.

As previously referenced, the youth in the Lab had to be trained to carry out research responsibly. In addition to the program objectives of the Lab, youth were encouraged through the activities in the Lab to develop research, analysis and presentation related skills. The modules guiding their development, included an understanding of the research context, how to identify gaps in knowledge and how to develop a qualitative study. They learned about research ethics (as informed by the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement) including balancing the aims of a research project with ethical methods and procedures to reduce or prevent harms to participants. Youth therefore had to learn the importance of informed and voluntary consent, confidentiality, and data security. They each gave written assent to participant confidentiality and managed the informed consent of participants. One youth researcher explained to the group that her process involved reviewing the informed consent document in detail (after we reviewed it together), highlighting the relevant sections and then

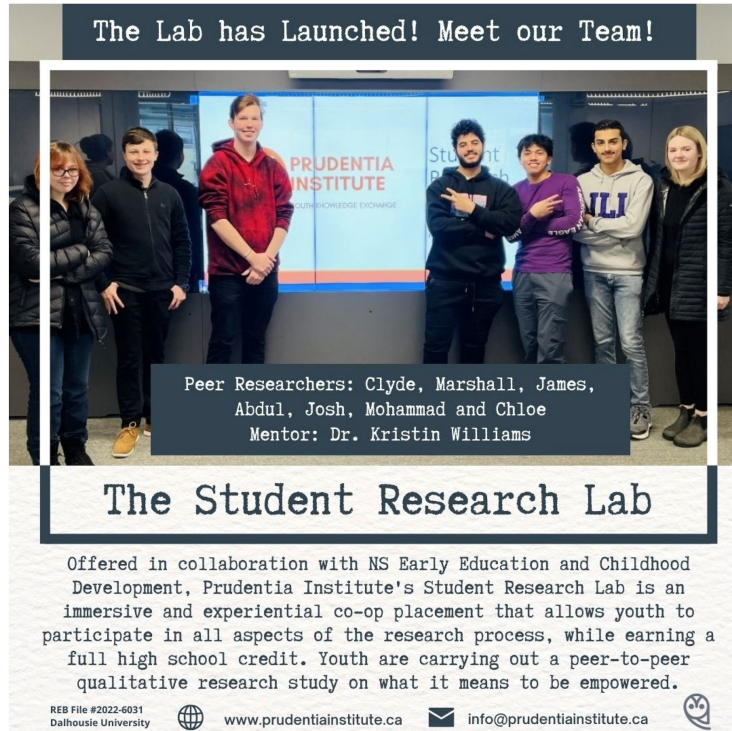


Figure 4.
Cohort B

Source(s): Authors work

sharing the details of the study in her own words to each participant. So, in addition to me offering training and support, they supported each other as well. Arguably, the most onerous part of the process for the youth researchers was collecting the consent forms. Data collected for which we did not receive written consent has not been included or retained. These were conditions set out by the ethics board.

We had to conduct three interviews each along with getting consent forms from both the parents and the students we interviewed. It was fun! ~Youth Researcher.

While half of the members of the first cohort completed the TCPS2 CORE (Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics), all 7 members of the second cohort were successful in completing the course. It is fair to say that this is a remarkable achievement as typically new researchers encounter this course in post-secondary and often not until they decide on a thesis study. We had a detailed module involving ethics which was sufficient for the study, but I was also interested in deepening the youth's understanding of research ethics beyond the minimum requirements for our study. I made the ethics course an elective component for the first cohort and a required component for the second. I raise the ethics course for two reasons: (1) research ethics were a core foundation of learning in the Lab and (2) students of this age were very capable of navigating and successfully completing this course.

The ethics course was a challenge for me because there was a lot of reading and remembering. There are 9 modules that you have to read and go over and afterwards you have to take a short quiz to see

I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with amazing peers and researchers. They have all shown me how important it is to have youth sharing their ideas, views and work in research. This has been an incredible adventure being able to conduct research that directly contributes to us all. I am sad to say goodbye. It has been a life changing experience.

While attending weekly classes and completing the ethics course. I have not only learned how it is done, but I now have the opportunity to put my own knowledge and skills to the test by conducting my own research on youth engagement!

I feel immensely proud of my fellow students, of my own peers that volunteered data for our research and for Professor Williams for her work with youth peer research and of myself. I am grateful for the O2 program and teachers for allowing me [this] opportunity.

As a student I was graciously supported at every step by Prudentia Institute and my O2 teacher [...]. Without the program I would never have even thought about exposure to this field [...] Involvement with the program has given me significantly rewarding academic and social experiences.

As a researcher in training among other people my age has been [an] extremely liberating experience. I am working with a team that listens to each other's ideas and shares accomplishments.

I'm so lucky to have been part of this group and have [had] the opportunity to meet people like me in a room with a common purpose.

We're able to come together for a common purpose and work together to make positive change.

The research lab has been really, really rewarding... it has opened my mind to a whole different perspective, and it just taught me a lot. It's just been really great.

I learned how to confidently conduct interviews, how to work with data and how to use it, about different types of research and how important and fun research is.

Working in the Lab has definitely made me feel more confident, at least in like the lab setting. And we all have, like, strengths that are like complementary to other people's strengths.

My favourite experience was being able to participate in group discussions.

I enjoyed being able to work with peers who were passionate strong people. I really like being able to conduct research as it was something I had never done before.

[My favourite experience was] gaining more confidence and realizing I'm not the only person who is like me.

My favourite experiences in the lab were all of our conversations and the connections we made on subjects that opened our eyes. We learned from each other and we learned together.

I had a lot of fun doing the interviews! I learned so much!

I am loving this experience and have learned so much about research studies and how they work, and it has really opened my mind to the world of research and how important it is

Source(s): Authors work

Figure 5.
Feedback from youth

what you remembered . . . Finally, there is a knowledge consolidation exercise which you take at the very end to receive your certificate proving that you passed the course. That was the hardest part for me. Took me a couple tries to get a passing mark ~ Youth Researcher.

Ethics are the basis or research and without them we would have zero regard for human life. Ethics are the most important piece of any research – Youth Researcher.

As part of the deliverables of the Lab, each student was asked to complete three qualitative interviews. These interviews were structured interviews (See [Figure 6: Interview Questions](#)).

Interviews generally lasted no more than 10–15 min, though we prepared each participant to expect the interview to last as much as 20 min. The structured nature of the questions and the short timeframe of the interviews were considered in the design of the research study to make it easier to engage youth in the process (both as youth researchers and youth participants). Findings in this paper are informed by 43 interviews completed by fifteen members of this first and second cohort combined (see [Figure 7: Participant List](#)).

My personal experience with the interviews went quite well. I didn't have much trouble recruiting people for our research. There were a couple people that declined but thankfully I was able to find some others that agreed. The whole process was interesting overall, and it was a great feeling to interview others. With my plan for the future, I believe this could be extremely helpful for me ~ Youth Researcher.

Figure 6.
Interview questions

1. What does the term “empowerment” mean to you?
2. Can you think of other words that you associate with empowerment?
3. How would you describe empowerment to others?
4. Describe a moment in which you felt empowered.
 - o What about that experience contributed to your sense of empowerment?
5. In what kind of situations/environments do you feel most empowered in?
 - o What about these environments makes you feel empowered?
 - o Prompt: social, formal, family situations or environments.
6. What would you say gets in the way of you feeling empowered? Prompt: tell me more.
7. What is necessary for you to feel more empowered?
 - o Prompt: social, formal, family situations or environments.
8. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me for our study?
9. If you felt empowered, what would that mean to you?
10. What does your empowered self look like in 10 years?
 - o Describe him/her/them to me?
11. How do we help others feel empowered?

Source(s): Authors work

Naming convention include interviewer and participant initials, participant number and gender. Due to limitations set by ethics, researcher names cannot be associated with participant code names and specific demographic information could not be collected. Pseudonyms have been provided to personalize the data. There were 43 interviews completed by 15 youth researchers.

Researcher 1	Pseudonym	Researcher 9	Pseudonym
CFNB1P1M	Brian	JRZCP1M	Clarke
CFDN2P2M	Nigel	JRABP2M	Bennoit
CFCRP3M	Rober	JRIDP3M	Declan
		JRIOP4M	Ivan
Researcher 2		Researcher 10	
HASAP1F	Avery	CBSRP1M	Rowan
HAEEP2F	Evelyn	CBLDP2M	Damian
HASAP3M	Sarah	CBBCP3M	Branden
Researcher 3		Researcher 11	
BMJSP1F	Sofia	MEIOP1M	Ibrahim
BMDDP2F	Diane	MERWP2M	Raphael
BMMSP3F	Michelle	MEXBP3M	Xaviour
Researcher 4		Researcher 12	
CGHMP2F	Harley	AAIOP1M	Ian
CGLGP1F	Lily	AACBP2M	Cabe
CGJVP3M	Jasper		
Researcher 5		Researcher 13	
THHTP1M	Tobias	CMLMP1M	Logan
THJCP2M	Jaxson		
THSLP3M	Shiloh		
Researcher 6		Researcher 14	
EBGDP1F	Grace	JSIRP1M	Isaac
EBLWP2F	Liz	JSCBP2F	Carleton
EBLDP3M	Leonard	JSADP3F	Adam
Researcher 7		Researcher 15	
MHSGP1F	Isabel	MMMMP1M	Max
MHHHP2F	Hailey	MMTCP2M	Thomas
MHRGP3M	Riley	MMJWP3M	Jason
Researcher 8			
MHSGP1F	Scarlett		
MHHHP2F	Hannah		
MHRGP3M	Reese		

Figure 7.
Participant list

Source(s): Authors work

Students recruited participants from their peer networks. In accordance with the policies of the Department of Education, students (youth researchers) were not permitted to recruit participants at school, but instead through less formal peer networks. Peer networks constituted any social networks available to youth. The only additional limitations set on involvement in the study was an age restriction (ages 15–18) and a willingness to participant.

To meet ethical requirements, we were not permitted to ask the age of participants, only ascertain through their voluntary consent that they met the age restriction. Personal questions about demographics were discouraged but many participants volunteered some insights. Each participant required informed parental/guardian consent and each youth participant had to also give their written informed assent. Youth researchers navigated this process under my close supervision.

When I had to conduct three interviews, I found it quite difficult at first. Trying to find the right people and the right time to do them. I did enjoy them though. It was interesting to listen to what they had to say and hear their thoughts ~ Youth Researcher

Many of the youth researchers remarked in general that interviewing was an empowering experience in and of itself. One youth researcher summarized what they learned in the Lab in the following way:

[I learned how to confidently conduct interviews, about different types of research and how to use them, how to work with data and use it, and how important and fun research is ~ Youth Researcher.

4. IPA in action

I enjoyed learning about all the aspects of qualitative research like methodology, IPA and data collection. I look forward to learning more about how the whole process works! ~ Youth Researcher.

To facilitate the use of IPA, I took time to share with the youth researchers, the theoretical underpinnings of IPA, how to do it, why it made sense for our study and the connection between what people say (our participants) and their thinking and emotions. Our young research team understood that they would be interpreting and making sense of what their participants said, by both listening and paying attention to verbal and non-verbal cues and understanding those insights in context (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). As a result, each youth researcher took notes during their interviews, in addition to recording the interview. The decision to complete just three interviews each is also consistent with IPAs commitment to a detailed interpretive account. I drew on Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez (2011) for our IPA steps. Starting with structured interviews, the youth helped to develop the questions and put them in a language consistent with what they thought their peers would understand. They were also given permission to adjust questions in the flow of an interview. We also developed prompts together. I focused on supporting the youth researchers with interview techniques, such as active listening, pausing, repeating and reflecting.

My favourite thing we did was the interviews and getting to interview people and talking one on one with them ~ Youth Researcher.

Each interview was recorded on a personal recording device, such as a phone and then the recording was provided to me to transcribe verbatim (with Otter.ai). The transcripts were returned to the youth researcher to check for accuracy, correct mistakes made by the transcription service, and to add their interview notes. Once data collection was complete, students learned how to clean data by removing identifying information and assigning participants code names to preserve participant anonymity.

Our later modules in the Lab covered coding and analysis. Students learned about inductive, deductive and hybrid coding. As a group, we agreed that hybrid coding, and using both in vivo codes and descriptive codes made sense.

We have conducted interviews [with] other youth to discover their thoughts [on] empowerment, and we've done some other projects to heighten our researching abilities. Using that data, [we] plan to help understand youth and their needs better ~ Youth Researcher.

Our research team had multiple sessions that were devoted to working with our data and data analysis. We first used inductive coding on sample transcripts of interviews to identify initial themes and then deductive coding to detect those themes in other transcripts. Specifically, we started with a single transcript and took an inductive approach to identify initial themes (as our first stage of analysis, [Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011](#)). We had a preliminary set of themes as a result. We then took another transcript and repeated the process. We applied this inductive approach to several transcripts until we were satisfied that we had identified all of our codes/themes. We then took another transcript and applied a deductive approach to see if our original themes emerged. We practiced coding passages until everyone felt comfortable and confident. We continued in this way until we were satisfied that we had a robust Codebook and that everyone felt they could continue to code independently.

We identified eight themes (See [Figure 8](#): Codebook). This is the phase of IPA referred to as “connecting themes” which begins with an initial set of themes, continues to involve some clustering and then a coherence around themes with examples ([Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011](#)). The themes we identified were variously named for how the youth participants described them or how our youth researchers interpreted them.

The themes that I found in the data that were associated with empowerment included being comfortable, confident, knowledgeable and having self respect ~ Youth Researcher

The youth researchers then took the Codebook and applied it to their own transcripts which is the stage of IPA referred to as “continuing the analysis with other cases” ([Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011](#)). After independent coding was complete, we regrouped and made refinements. The process was interactive, iterative and reinforced our impressions of data saturation. Critical to our understanding of these themes and codes was the youths' own emic understanding of their interviews, their interpretations of insider language and in this way, I found that the youth researchers acted as vital knowledge translators and interpreters.

Through subsequent conversations, we made connections across the data. Consensus was achieved through discussion with the entire group of youth engaged. I facilitated, clarified and reflected what I heard and offered advice and support where needed. As promoted by [Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez \(2011\)](#) and much to my surprise, the youth intuitively funneled the data into themes that had both positive and negative exemplars. This means that we found both positive and negative sounding examples of our themes/codes.

These sessions catapulted our analysis into key insights and findings. We also contemplated implications to the research and possible applications for knowledge mobilization.

There are such deep talkers here. Like, we'll go on about one topic for like, an hour, like two hours, and we won't stop talking. And I think it's just great because seeing people, like, so deep dive into something, especially young people, it just makes me feel so comfortable ~ Youth Researcher.

Following these sessions, we hosted a day entitled the “research showcase” in which each student presented insights from their own interviews. These presentations were made in front of their peers in the Lab, their cooperative teachers and representatives from the Department of Education. The students demonstrated incredible insights into their own data and their experience as researchers was clear. They were comfortable and confident! We used

Theme/Code: Financial Security

Positive: Having enough money, financially stable, ownership of things (house and car), good occupation

Negative: No opportunities, lack of ownership, no stability, rough spending, bad habits

Theme/Code: Physical Comfort

Positive: Familiarity, relaxed, not stressed, feeling safe

Negative: Stressed, anxious, nervous, unbalanced

Theme/Code: Knowledge

Positive: Knowing things, feeling knowledgeable, informed, experience

Negative: Feeling stupid, feeling uneducated, insecure about knowledge

Theme/Code: Power

Positive: In power, in charge, authority, progression, gaining following, presentation ability, ability to be convincing and persuasive

Negative: No power, only following, no advancement, contained, no prospects

Theme/Code: Confidence

Positive: Feeling sound in abilities, proud, taking pride in abilities, believing in self, self-belief, enabling others to feel confident, boosting others up

Negative: Putting up walls, protecting self, not allowing self to develop, keeping to self, not speaking up, hiding ideas and self

Theme/Code: Resilience

Positive: Bounce back, cope with difficulty, mental health, stability, good energy level

Negative: Giving up, hopeless, lack of drive, not wanting to try new things

Theme/Code: Agency and Voice

Positive: Having the ability to be heard or to speak, freedom to speak (voice), feeling heard, feeling seen, feeling part of something, feeling powerful

Negative: Silent, don't feel seen or heard, don't feel you can be heard, don't have space, not noticed, don't feel valid, useless, powerless

Theme/Code: Future Looking

Positive: Can talk about the future, can see themselves in the future, can think positively or negatively about the future, has goals, idealized version of self and future

Negative: Negative ideas about the future, negative ideas about self, can't see the future, don't feel like you will get far or advance, poor visualization

Source(s): Authors work

Figure 8.
Codebook

this session to synthesize and make sense of the data and this led to deeper interpretations and insights. In IPA this is referred to a process whereby the meanings are translated into narrative accounts through the voice of the researcher and often results in an expansion of the analysis (Hefferon and Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). A final session at the end of the Lab offered a full review of the experience and offered insights into the researchers' experience with the study, including how they felt changed by the process, how their ideas about youth empowerment had expanded or shifted and what they had learned.

It was an incredible morning of presentations and seeing students really shine. The depth of understanding of the subject matter, the incredible conversations and engagement were really something to behold! ~ Youth Pathways Consultant.

We had two separate cohorts of youth researchers as part of this study. The second cohort validated what the first cohort found and offered additional examples with new data collected. One youth researcher did remark how important it was to feel comfortable in the Lab in order to fully embrace the experience and contribute to the process of knowledge making. They connected the aforementioned ideas of YPAR in terms of the relationships between critical consciousness and critical action (see [Section 2.2 YPAR](#)). This speaks to the value of context when enacting YPAR. The environment for youth that you provide is immensely important:

You need to have the ability to speak up and be comfortable speaking out because if you can't speak out, your opinion won't be heard. And you won't be . . . you know, you won't have your opinion out there and have that, you know, that's really important, especially with what we're doing ~ Youth Researcher.

5. Insights from the research

In this section, I review what we learned about empowerment in two stages: (1) theory building and (2) emic insights from youth. I conclude this section by reviewing some of my own learnings from enacting YPAR which I hope will be helpful for others engaging with youth in research.

5.1 Stage 1: theorizing empowerment

We are now moving away from the experiences of the youth researchers to the insights of the youth participants. The first level of analysis uncovered several ideas significantly informing youth perspectives on empowerment. Notably, our participants' initial thoughts about empowerment were future-looking, representing more independent states of being. Themes included financial security, physical comfort, safety and health and wellbeing (see [Table 1: First Level of Analysis and Initial Themes](#)).

Brian: "Hopefully successful, financially stable, mentally stable, somewhere, I can sit down and live with a group of people, whether like forever or not. And then obviously, coming up with financial stuff, we'd be having a good vehicle to go somewhere in a good occupation where I'm stable and I can constantly just be comfortable where I am."

Sarah: "I would like to have completed my secondary degree of university and worked through different types of jobs to finally find the one that is properly suited for me and to be able to be happy and enjoy what I do for a living . . . [I will feel empowered] when I gain more responsibilities, or I'm feeling more trustworthy."

Hailey: "[Empowerment means] strength, confidence, determination."

Nigel: "Getting a part time job, making my own stuff like meals, having my own clothes . . . Independence."

Harley: "[Empowerment means being] comfortable, happy, relaxed."

Isabel: "I would look like a strong independent woman with my own house and a full-time job."

Grace: "Other words that I associate with empowerment would be confidence."

Tobias: "While also feeling good about yourself, because you don't have the guidance of your parents as much in like, the long run, your parents can guide you in certain ways that you do not know. But at the same time, if you can figure it out by yourself at a certain age, that is a good like, accomplishment that you can say that you did. Empowerment would be to own my own things like a home, to be able to pay for it, as well as a car, and food."

Source(s): Authors work

Table 1.
First level of analysis
and initial themes

Substantially, these initial observations were also connected to (and understood as leading to) additional empowering capabilities and capacities. These included feelings of happiness, strength, confidence, bravery and even leadership (or leadership capacity) (See [Table 2: Empowering Capabilities and Capacities](#)).

Finally, youth associated empowerment with other important concepts such as acceptance, personal power, control, equality and having voice and agency (see [Table 3: Associated Concepts](#)). They saw these concepts as distinct but related.

The second stage of inquiry focused on when and where youth felt empowered. Appreciably, youth felt that their environment and context and the people around them were important influences and factors affecting their sense and access to empowerment (or empowering situations). However, youth did not see empowerment as something given to them (as problematized in the literature and highlighted earlier in this paper). Many of the youth cited internal drivers as important. Here is an example:

Hailey: 'It means to have self confidence and to persevere through things and to find inner strength in yourself.'

The participants gave a variety of interesting examples of situations in which they felt empowered (see [Table 4: Examples of Feeling Empowered](#)). The opportunity to pursue personal goals, express their voice and agency, to have control and power were seen as transformative experiences for youth.

Finally, the data illustrates that when youth feel empowered (even when imagining so), they also feel that they have an obligation to help others to also feel empowered. Here I saw a strong connection between empowerment and critical consciousness (See [Table 5: Critical Consciousness](#)).

In [Figure 9: Theorizing Empowerment](#), I summarize these findings and note the processional nature of the insights. Participants made sense of the concept of empowerment by first considering definitional aspects of the phenomenon and often positioned it as something apart from themselves (future looking or future state). Then participants started to describe what they saw as empowering capabilities and capacities making the concept more personal and immediate. When empowerment became less abstract and more personal, youth were able to associate it with other key concepts that seemed familiar and related. Finally, the participants offered a deeper understanding of empowerment and its relationship with critical consciousness (see [Figure 9: Theorizing Empowerment](#)).

Michelle: "It would mean I feel confident going into a situation I knew I could succeed in."

Nigel: "It's really just the process of becoming stronger, more confident as time goes on."

Sarah: "I would describe empowerment as the feeling as when you're looking at yourself and you feel more confident, or you feel more happy about who you are as a person because of certain things that you accomplished."

Isabel: "[I associate empowerment with] teamwork and leadership and supporting others . . . Being brave and being a good role model in front of other people."

Michelle: "Putting someone in a position of power over themselves or other people."

Grace: "Someone or something that has the power to move other people in a positive direction. It has like a good impact on whatever subject you're empowering."

Avery: "Bravery. Women."

Riley: "Strong, brave, powerful."

Jaxson: "Bravery."

Source(s): Authors work

Table 2.
Empowering
capabilities and
capacities

QROM
19,5

20

Lily: "To be yourself and who you want to be and do what you want to do without fear of other people and how they're going to think of you and backlash for who you are as a person . . . being kind and having others treat you with kindness . . . That would mean living without fear, not just worrying what other people think if other people are taking what I'm saying wrong . . . If you just learn just a little bit about people who are maybe not like you, I feel like that would help a lot just for tolerance for acceptance."
Harley: "Sharing your voice . . . Sharing their voices and what they think [about] certain things."
Michelle: "Opportunity, control, independence . . . It makes me feel like I'm in control of things in my life."
Jasper: "Personal free will and choice."
Sofia: "I would think of it as strength and power, you know, but using it in a positive light."
Nigel: "People having power and control over their own lives . . . Empowerment means that people are equal to others."
Brian: "How you feel when you're able to push something you really believe in."
Lily: "Being who you want to be without fear of persecution of without having to hide it."
Avery: "Standing up for yourself. Proving people wrong."
Jaxson: "Proud of yourself and who you are."

Table 3.
Associated concepts

Source(s): Authors work

Avery: "I feel more empowered at work when I'm able to solve certain tasks that I would say are difficult, or in school when I'm handed difficult assignments, and I'm able to complete them and achieve the proper good results."
Grace: "I think the biggest moment I felt empowered was when I was doing the LGBTQ March downtown. And I was like, at the front of my group, and I was marching. I was like the lead marcher and it was really cool. And I was like, felt really empowered . . . I think it was the fact that I was like, a gay girl, like, at the front of the March, like marching, you know, and I just felt really good. Like, it just made me feel good that I was at the front."
Sofia: "I felt very empowered when I got my second degree black belt, as I was the only female that was going for my second degree black belt, and I was the only coloured person going for my second degree black belt. So, I thought it was pretty empowering that I was like, 14 or 15. Getting my, my second degree in Taekwondo . . . that's very, that's a big accomplishment there."
Michelle: "Areas where I have expertise: singing, music, baking, cooking . . . It makes me feel like I am in control of things in my life."
Lily: "Being able to leave an environment that was harmful for me and move into a better place."
Avery: "I was boxing. I was winning and proving people wrong . . . Kind of just the fact that you're underestimated. When people think you don't know a lot about it, but you kind of do."
Sarah: "When I was asked to be a manager, I felt empowered because I was able to gain more responsibilities and help in the bigger picture."
Isabel: "I felt empowered when I was racing in war canoe at Nationals, and we won a race and it was with 14 other people in the boat. So, it was really fun."
Hailey: "When I got a 90 on my unit test, it made me feel empowered and confident in myself that I can do anything with determination and free will to do [it]."
Jaxson: "Like, if I'm able to tell them the kind of jokes I tell with my friends, which for a lot of people, I think, you know, they wouldn't feel as comfortable telling a lot of those jokes. So I think being able to tell what kind of crazy jokes I tell like, are my friends, like with my family? I think being able to do that makes me feel more empowered and in control of my life, I guess."

Table 4.
Examples of feeling
empowered

Source(s): Authors work

5.2 Stage 2: emic insights from youth

In this [section I](#) review the impressions collected from the research team while conducting the study. These insights constitute the emic insights of our youth researchers and how they made sense of the data they collected. Here I learned three important things. The first is that the youth recognized that younger youth (15 or 16 years old) had a harder time expressing their ideas than older youth (17 or 18 years old). The youth researchers did not feel that this meant that they did not want to be empowered, but rather that they had less language and

Michelle: "Giving someone power over their own lives and decisions . . . Give them the information they need to thrive and succeed."

Haily: "Making someone feel better about themselves."

Jaxon: "I guess like through motivation, like helping them feel like more motivated. It can really help them feel more empowered. Because if you are demotivated, you're not going to feel empowered."

Tobias: "Motivation, definitely. Because if someone is not motivated enough, they feel like they just don't want to do anything with their life. I've met tons of people who just couldn't, like, barely live with themselves. But they still have so much more that they can do. They've still got years of their lives. But they just want to end it at like the age of 18. And that just kind of sucks. So definitely motivation to other people. All right."

Leonard: "Empowering people to be the best they can be."

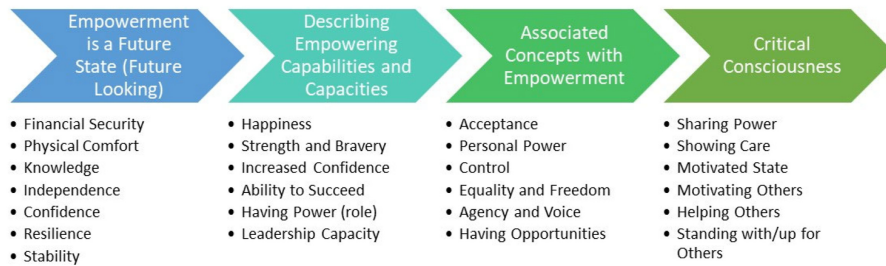
Evelyn: "Helping [with] their needs. Making them comfortable."

Tobias: "Help motivate children. And the reason I say that is because kids just don't understand life sometimes."

Riley: "Being on their side."

Source(s): Authors work

Table 5.
Critical consciousness



Source(s): Authors work

Figure 9.
Theorizing
empowerment

experience to draw on. Older youth also had more language fluency. This suggests that we need to give younger youth more opportunities to experience empowerment and help them make sense and articulate the personal meaning of such experiences (See [Figure 10: Infographic Youth Empowerment](#)).

The second significant insight was that the youth researchers felt changed by the experience of carrying out primary research on empowerment. When I asked them to explain this, several cited that their ideas about what empowerment was expanded through the conversations that they had with other youth and with each other. The process of talking about empowerment not only broadened their ideas about what empowerment was, but also where it happened and how to potentially replicate it for themselves. This insight is consistent with other research that indicates that fostering youth engagement can have positive effects on youth empowerment ([Owen and Irion-Groth, 2020](#)). Imagination combined with agency can generate different perceived trajectories ([Priestley, 2020](#)).

It gives you some insight into yourself and other people ~ Youth Researcher.

Additionally, the responsibility of collecting and analyzing data helped the young researchers feel confident and important. They cited the difference this co-operative placement had with others they experienced where they felt that they were assigned mundane or trivial tasks because they were youth. Here, because they were youth, they were seen as a critical member of the team and their ideas were valued and seen as significantly contributing to the project. Here I made the connection with other literature on youth



INSIGHTS FROM THE STUDENT RESEARCH LAB

WHAT IS THE STUDENT RESEARCH LAB?

The Lab is a youth development program at Prudentia Institute: Youth Knowledge Exchange. The Lab is an immersive and experiential cooperative placement that allows youth in grades 11 and 12 to learn about all aspects of the research process while earning a full high school credit!



WHAT ARE YOUTH INVESTIGATING?

The youth in the Lab are collecting and analyzing youth perspectives on empowerment through a qualitative, peer-to-peer research approach.

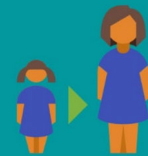


WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

We are asking youth to help us understand what it means to be empowered so that we can better support their positive development.

GROWING UP

As youth get older, they learn how to describe their experiences better, express their needs and share their experiences of empowerment.



LEARN BY DOING

Youth interviewing their peers reported that their own ideas about what empowerment is expanded the more they talked about it with other youth.



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE EMPOWERED?

Youth believe empowerment depends on factors like financial security, health, and personal safety. Empowerment leads to motivation, confidence, resilience and even the capacity to lead. Youth associate empowerment with acceptance, comfort, and having agency and voice. If youth feel empowered, they also believe they can help others around them to feel empowered too!

ENVIRONMENT IS IMPORTANT

Youth feel that their environment, context and the people around them are important influences, and that empowerment can be initiated or maintained if we pay attention to external factors around youth.



IT ONLY TAKES A SINGLE MOMENT

Youth reported that a single moment can be all that it takes to feel empowered and that such experiences are transformative. Youth want to have more autonomy, control and responsibility! It can be as simple as preparing a meal for the whole family.

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Figure 10.
Infographic youth
empowerment

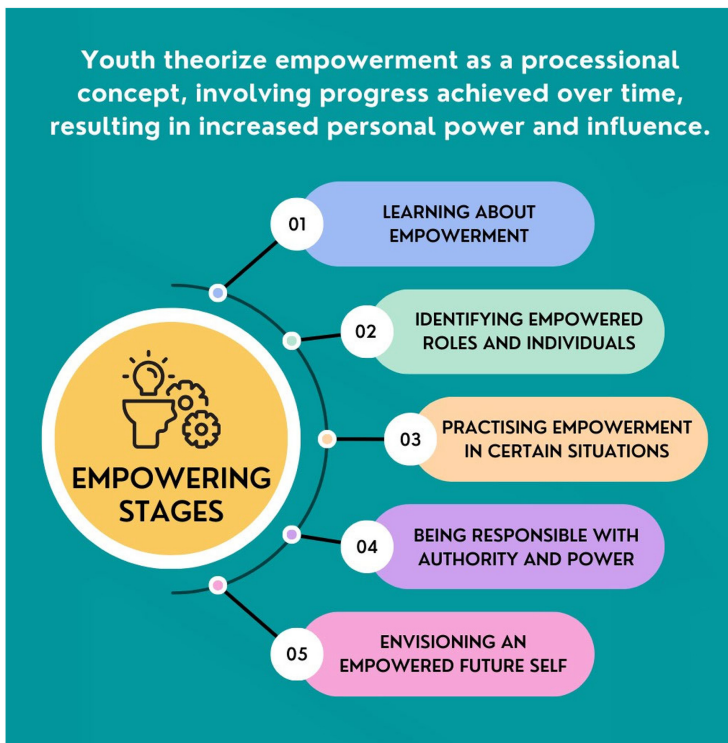
Source(s): Authors work

empowerment that explored how engaging youth, equipping them with the necessary abilities to engage actively and with confidence in meaningful activities can be transformative (going beyond intellectual learning) (Owen and Irion-Groth, 2020).

Finally, understanding and measuring empowerment requires a theoretical framework which appreciates how individuals assert control, use resources and change their

environment and circumstances. Theorizing youth empowerment from a youth informed perspective, reinforces empowerment as a processional concept with clear stages of development (Carr, 2003; Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010). This process begins with youth learning about empowerment and proceeds to a phase where they practice and develop confidence and competence in using power and being empowered. In our data analysis conversations, I identified five stages of the empowering process, including: (1) youth becoming familiar with empowerment and understanding the basic traits and language associated with the concept, (2) youth identifying (and identifying with) empowered roles and empowered individuals in society (proximally or distally), (3) youth practicing empowerment in certain situations, such as work, school, home or community (including mimicking role models), (4) youth learning to be responsible with power and authority and gaining confidence and competence and (5) youth being able to envision an empowered future self, able to achieve a range of desired goals (See Figure 11: Empowering Stages).

As I have previously stated, empowerment involves progress, achieved over time, resulting in increased personal power and influence. As youth mature, they acquire both the language and experience necessary to make sense of empowerment, empowering experiences and empowering responses. They can express their thoughts and feelings, including articulating the specifics of their experiences with empowerment and the personal meaning of such experiences. Emic perspectives from youth point to the need for empowering activities to be strongly linked to personal goals, to be personally relevant and to be future looking. Youth also wish their empowering experiences to resonate with a larger purpose.



Source(s): Authors work

Figure 11.
Empowering stages

My takeaway from these conversations is three-fold: (1) we need to curate more conversations on important topics and to give youth the space to reflect and grow their ideas; (2) we need to engage younger youth in empowering experiences and help them understand and develop their voice and agency and (3) we need to engage more youth in knowledge production. This last point is not just because they felt changed by the experience of becoming researchers, but because I did as well. I was consistently surprised and amazed by them. As I shared this with them, they also indicated something else important. We had reduced the sense of power disparity between us. They felt comfortable, accepted and secure and therefore their feelings of motivation and confidence and capacity to lead emerged. They found their voice and their own personal power. The very ideas that we had been studying (and the conceptualizing and theorizing we were undertaking about empowerment) was happening in our shared research experience. The Lab was becoming an empowering place.

5.3 YPAR reflections

I want to take this opportunity to share with you what I believe are some of the crucial takeaways that I have learned from enacting a model of YPAR.

5.3.1 Create a safe place. Youth have enjoyed the Lab experience because it feels safe, and they can be themselves. They have been supported by administrators and educators and each other. I have worked very hard as well to be supportive and appreciative. As a result, the Lab has functioned as both a developmental experience and a scholarly research lab. As I am putting the final touches on this paper, I am also shepherding the fourth cohort through the Lab and each cohort has remarked that being removed from the school environment has allowed them to escape the pressures of school whilst also being able to show up authentically. So, though I think that school is a very important place for youth development, finding other spaces for youth to explore their identity and various ideas, is critical.

5.3.2 Training. Youth need sufficient, but not taxing training. Training youth in the Lab is not very different to training undergraduate or graduate students who are carrying out primary research for the first time, but I have found that it is important to really leave lots of time for sensemaking and discussion. The conversations in the Lab have been some of the most enjoyable conversations that I have ever had. They have been philosophical, technical, practical and even, tangential. They have spanned the specifics of how to do research, why to do it in a particular way through to what youth are experiencing day-to-day. It is very *real*. The time and space for such conversations helped the youth in the Lab feel not only confident about conducting research, but really valued as a member of our team and as an individual. Each saw in each their strengths while also demonstrating empathy and compassion. Our developmental approach also contributed to our sense of community. We were doing something together.

5.3.3 Build in value. Since the Lab had to meet certain criteria to be an approved co-operative placement, I had in mind various activities that would enrich the experience in the Lab. The career mentor visits turned out to be an extremely valuable component because it not only helped youth explore career futures, it provided an opportunity for youth to ask questions to adults that they might not have asked in another formal setting (such as school where social pressures are inhibiting). This has led to a new feature of the Lab that we piloted with our fourth cohort. We now have a youth panel in which older youth (19–22 years old) come to talk to the younger youth in the Lab about the next stages of growing up. Topics include everything from mental health, to financing your education, to becoming more independent. In other words, *adulthood*.

5.3.4 Do not underestimate youth. As I reflect on Lab experience, there was not a single activity that the youth did not actively participate in or embrace. They surprised me at every stage with their capabilities and capacities. They excelled at the very challenging ethics

course. They managed a rather complex informed consent protocol. They analyzed their data deeply and thoughtfully. They presented their research findings to peers and teachers in compelling ways. The youth in the Lab are 15, 16 and 17 years old. However, they performed as well as undergraduate students. One teacher remarked that their critical thinking was on par with that of her master's level seminars.

5.3.5 Remind the youth of their value. I think it may go without saying that encouragement and positive praise are important strategies for youth engagement, but so is specific and valuable feedback. As a co-op placement, youth received mid and final evaluations, but I also provided regular feedback, teasing out their strengths and accomplishments in real time. I did this openly and frequently. I felt that this affirming approach really helped the youth develop in confidence and skill. I think that youth need to know that they are capable of remarkable things and when they accomplish something, we need to tell them how amazing they are.

6. Discussion

6.1 Youth participatory action research

This study set out to contribute to youth participatory action research (YPAR) by promoting a model of YPAR and by offering a “window of understanding” in terms of how YPAR can be enacted (Ponzoni, 2016, p. 559). YPAR diffuses power between adults and youth, and such was the environment I set out to create in the Lab. Youth were placed in an expert role and valued for their emic insights: “youth become the inquirers on social issues impacting their lives” (Anderson, 2020, p. 243.). This new ownership over their own learning transpired in two ways: (1) they became proficient researchers, and (2) they expanded their own ideas about a specific social phenomenon affecting youth. In line with a systematic review of the literature on YPAR, I saw the same benefits noted across a variety of domains, including agency, leadership, knowledge, social competence, critical consciousness and interpersonal skills (Anderson, 2020). Youth became more confident speakers, took more risks in terms of offering ideas and connected their ideas to the responsibility of mobilizing knowledge to those that need it most.

A systematic review of the literature also found that there are three themes consistent across successful YPAR employment: (1) youth should be compensated for their role, (2) universities and community partnerships should be leveraged and (3) school administrators and education officials should be engaged (Anderson, 2020). With the support and advice of high school educators. I set up the structure of the Lab as a co-operative placement so that students could earn a full high school credit for their participation. This provided not only an incentive, but one not focused on grades or money, which has been a critique of such methods because it conflicts with YPAR principles (Anderson, 2020). Students are evaluated for completing co-operative components and receive qualitative feedback. I also added other valuable opportunities to the co-operative placement, including the mentor visits, the ability to design their own developmental independent projects related to knowledge mobilization, and lessons beyond what was required to carry out the study (e.g. presentation techniques, program evaluation, universal design for learning). A secondary consideration was the engagement of university and community partnerships. In this case, this includes my university partners and the community non-profit organization as well as the funding partners associated with the project; all of whom provided vital capacity to the endeavour. A final consideration was the engagement of school administrators and education officials. Developing the program of the Lab was a thorough and thoughtful process. I have been enthusiastically supported by co-operative teachers, pathway consultants, department officials and senior administrators. These various educators and officials all took personal time to see the Lab in action and hear from the students directly about the project (See Figure 12: Feedback from Educators and Administrators [5]). This study therefore builds on

[The Lab] encourages students to explore their personal interests, fostering creativity, curiosity, and self-discovery. This approach prepares students to make informed decisions about their future academic and career paths. [Dr. Williams'] mentorship and guidance have instilled confidence and readiness in the students.

Upon my first visit to the Lab, I heard firsthand from students who spoke confidently about their experience, sharing specific examples of their learning and growth.

Thank you for providing [my student] with such an amazing learning opportunity. We really appreciate all that you have done for the students!

It was an incredible morning of presentations and seeing students really shine. The depth of understanding of the subject matter, the incredible conversations and engagement were really something to behold! [speaking of youth presentations on their research]

[Student's name] has deepened his understanding of research as well as broadening the scope of what he now knows is available to him moving forward.

It's phenomenal! It showcases pathways that can be difficult to highlight in a conventional O2/co-op classroom and helps students build confidence as they get closer to graduation and post-secondary experiences.

I have noticed that they feel more confident with themselves and have been more willing to get support. Yes, I think my student needed to gain [these] skills and feel appreciated.

They [my student] have a great understanding of the complexity of academic research. They are more comfortable with the idea of post-secondary education.

There are many skills developed [...]. My student's experience was relaxed and informative.

I have noticed a change in confidence, knowledge and expanding of groups.

ABSOLUTELY!!! It was amazing to watch the organic conversations, respect, engagement, small group discussions - it built knowledge, self advocacy etc!!! LOVED IT!!

They are a lot more open and confident, they see a future in academia that they did not see prior to the placement or not as attainable.

It has impacted their outlook on what area of health sciences they are wanting to get into after high school.

Those that have the opportunity to explore research and learn about ethics at such a young age I feel is going to set them up for success in the future. It gives youth a space to not only feel safe and share but to help build community and drive further research in giving the youth a perspective they may not otherwise get.

Source(s): Authors work

Figure 12.
Feedback from
educators and
administrators

current literature that states the importance of these context considerations and stakeholder roles when deploying YPAR. I also concede that YPAR is complex, but very doable with engaged stakeholders and a strong commitment to YPAR principles.

I do wish to review two critiques of YPAR and how I attempted to address them. One key critique of YPAR is the authenticity in which youth are engaged in the "action" aspect of research and the potential *schoolification* of youth research whereby institutional powers change the research agenda (Keddie, 2021). I did not want youth engagement to be performative. Locating the Lab outside of the school environment was critical to this objective. By operating independently from schools it was not subject to the same limiting effects (also known as "bounded empowerment" p. 389). Youth referenced this routinely, but they described it as socially induced shyness or peer pressure. As a result, I avoided some of the practical challenges that may arise from conducting a YPAR project within schools, whilst still benefiting from the collaboration and partnership of school administration and officials. Regularly, the youth remarked that there did not seem to be the same *power imbalance* that they experienced in the traditional classroom and that this *power balance* contributed to their enjoyment, engagement and learning (Hemy and Meshulam, 2021). One young researcher in our third cohort also commented that at school, they are shamed for demonstrating their passion and intelligence, something they coined as "passion shame". The Lab managed to avoid these social context constraints on youth identities and allowed them to be more of their full, unencumbered selves.

A second critique of YPAR is one that I touched on at the beginning of this paper; it is often considered a “black box” in which the internal mechanisms for how one employs YPAR is not offered in detail (Malorni *et al.*, 2022). This makes the feasibility of YPAR difficult to contemplate despite the espoused benefits (Abraczinskas and Zarrett, 2020). Here, I have endeavoured to share my process in detail to bring transparency to the research and to make clear the ways in which youth have been meaningfully engaged (Heard, 2022). This has included how youth were significantly engaged in the analysis which has been a concern of some studies (Malorni *et al.*, 2022). I hope my readers find my explanations instructive.

YPAR is comprised of several relational practices and these include shared power (shared role as researchers), forging a collective identity (a research team in the Lab) and facilitating dialogue (through a variety of modes, see Hemy and Meshulam, 2021), all of which are central to critical inquiry, reflection and action (Malorni *et al.*, 2022). My key learning from this experience boils down to a commitment which governed all aspects of deploying this method in action: *youth need to be engaged authentically in activities in which they have agency, control and choice*. Placing myself in an environment where I was often on “equal” footing with my research team, learning as they were learning, helped them feel the significance of their role and it reminded me to listen deeply and see them as the experts they were. I recognize that we could problematize this notion of experiencing equality of power, but I do feel that at critical moments, we shared power and the youth felt that they were empowered in the Lab in ways that they did not feel empowered elsewhere.

A critical component to the Lab’s success as a research lab and as a venue for YPAR is built-in program evaluation. Towards the end of the Lab experience, the young researchers are taught about summative program evaluation and then asked to evaluate the Lab experience in relation to the program objectives outlined earlier in this paper: (1) collecting effective data on issues that matter to youth, (2) using a peer-to-peer research approach, (3) teaching high school students to become researchers, (4) allowing students to experience a co-operative learning program that earns them a high school credit and (5) allowing students to explore career futures involving research. Since we had already created a very healthy rapport in the Lab, the youth in the Lab were able to offer candid feedback which I believe has improved our application of YPAR and the youth’s overall experience in the Lab. In addition to an in-person session devoted to feedback, anonymous feedback was also collected from both the youth and their educators (some of which I have included herein). Some changes that I incorporated included extending the weeks of the program from 12 to 14 to allow youth to have more time to work with their data and complete their interviews. Additionally, the ethics course is now a mandatory requirement for all youth researchers in the Lab, and I added a workshop and devoted synchronous time to completing the course together. Additionally, the youth panel will be a new ongoing feature. Among other things, one outcome that was particularly meaningful, was that 100% of the youth in the Lab reported that they understood the benefits of YPAR and understood how to implement knowledge mobilization in their own communities through channels that would reach other youth/peers. In other words, the youth not only felt like confident researchers, but also, they understood how to translate what they had learned and turn it into awareness and action.

6.2 Youth empowerment

The data the youth collected and their own sensemaking on youth empowerment also contributes to the conceptual debates about empowerment as a complex social phenomenon. Prior studies have problematized the lack of consistency in the way empowerment has been defined and cited a vagueness of the phenomenon and a lack of conceptual refinement (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010; Priestley, 2020). Though I saw significant consistency across our youth participants, I have come to appreciate the complexity of the phenomenon through

this study and the usefulness of having a closer look at youth perspectives from generation alpha, which I believe adds even more nuance to the debates. Where I did see consistency with other findings is that empowerment should be understood as related to but separate from concepts such as mastery, agency, self-efficacy, self-determination and self regulation (Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010). This study also supports the notion that youth empowerment focuses on a “subset of goals that are personally meaningful and power oriented” (p. 647). Mastery may be a part of it, but not necessarily.

At the start of this paper, I shared a definition of youth empowerment which explains it as a concept that involves developing youth capacity to take control of their development, enabling their inclusion and active participation in all aspects of society with implications for wellbeing and community (Ogamba, 2019). The data in this study supports this definition but adds some conceptual clarity in terms of how it is viewed by youth as a process, with defined stages involving learning, role identification, practice, authority and visioning. I believe that this insight was possible because I had the emic insights of our youth researchers helping to make sense of the data collected and pushing the analysis for expanded insights through IPA. The data in this study, point to key definitional components as well, such as security, comfort, independence and stability, but also capabilities and capacities, such as strength and bravery and leadership capacity. Youth also clarified some associated concepts, with youth empowerment encompassing notions like acceptance, freedom, agency, voice and equality. From this, I believe we have a more vivid understanding of the phenomenon of youth empowerment and an appreciation how to support youth empowerment in a variety of settings.

An important consideration where younger youth are concerned, is that there are many more structures in place to impact the empowerment process (positively or negatively). The social context constraints are important for educators and caregivers to note as they may either promote or deter moments of transformation that are possible through empowering experiences. When asked to describe a moment in which they felt empowered, youth were able to draw on moments in their every day, which speaks to the relative accessibility of empowering experiences. The youth researchers also indicated how much they related to the examples they were given. This signalled to me not only the transformative effects of empowering moments but our responsibility as adults to foster and nurture such moments and opportunities for youth across different contexts, environments and circumstances, while also reducing barriers to such experiences. Adults in care roles should reflect on how to be enabling adults and specifically how to minimize social/context constraints.

This study did not set out to measure youth empowerment. I was curious first and foremost with exploring the phenomenon and doing so in a way that engaged youth meaningfully (Heard, 2022). However, the utility of empowerment cannot be ignored (Powell *et al.*, 2021). I believe the data presented in this study might help inform future studies that set out to benchmark empowerment and monitor and measure empowerment in youth. Specifically, there are scales that measure empowerment and its relationship to leadership competency (see Powell *et al.*, 2021) and our participants did cite a perceived relationship between their notions of empowerment and leadership (or the capacity to lead).

As a critical scholar, I am interested in what this study can contribute to the discourse on empowerment that considers theorizing and attends to the importance of social context. Some studies have looked at whether or not empowerment is a process or an outcome (Carr, 2003), the benefits of engaging youth in developmental projects (Trivelli and Morel, 2021) and empowerment's relationship to other critical concepts such as social movements (Christens *et al.*, 2016). To these discourses, I add a perspective which offers some agreement but also new ideas. First, youth who may be experiencing empowerment for the first time are invariably at the beginning of a new life process. This study supports the notion that youth experiencing empowerment for the first time increases their understanding about the world

around them and their role in it (Carr, 2003). It is also a dynamic process and the examples of empowering experiences that the youth participants shared were so varied, that the opportunity to provide empowering experiences may lie in the opportunity to nurture and facilitate vs construct (per Carr, 2003).

Second, involving youth in the process of researching youth empowerment was also a developmental opportunity which did furnish contemplation and expanded thinking on personal empowerment. I agree with Trivelli and Morel (2021) that participation is a key part of creating pro-youth opportunities in which youth are more present in significant ways, making decisions, having influence and being valued. I saw firsthand our young researchers grow in confidence, share their thoughts and ideas openly, change and expand their thinking about what empowerment is and be empowered themselves as researchers. Similar engagement of youth across various developmental programs has been found to be transformative (Owen and Irion-Groth, 2020; Trivelli and Morel, 2021). This study adds to the literature that illustrates participation and engagement of youth should lead to better outcomes (Trivelli and Morel, 2021). In this case, insightful research on issues related to youth (a model of YPAR), and an impactful youth developmental program (the Lab). Youth need to be consulted, but they also need to be involved as critical collaborators and decision makers.

Third, I understood from the onset that involving young people in a community organizational context with a meaningful project had the potential to ignite their critical consciousness (Christens *et al.*, 2016). Conceptually, empowerment and critical consciousness are related; both involving cognitive processes related to social change. However, I was struck by how youth in the study made this connection explicit. Youth (as both researchers and participants), whilst talking about empowerment, acknowledged social injustices, demonstrated active roles in potential change, demonstrated care for negative effects of power imbalances and connected empowerment to notions of autonomy and independence (Christens *et al.*, 2016). Their critical reflections on empowerment moved quickly from an abstract imagined future state to examples in which they were actively empowered, supporting their own development, supporting those more vulnerable or engaging positively in broader societal impact. Many of the youth participants and the youth researchers connected the phenomenon of empowerment to social movements and their own development as coinciding with a role associated with social justice.

6.3 Implications for management and organizational studies and education

At the start of this paper, I alluded to benefits for both management and organizational studies and education. Youth are often discriminated against in terms of their involvement in formal organizational spaces and some of these barriers include the perceived lack of maturity or capabilities of the youth, their different social-cognitive styles, lack of awareness of opportunities, dependence on adults and limited mobility and of course youth perceptions on being engaged (Crocetti *et al.*, 2014; Pacey *et al.*, 2019). Creating a safe space for youth and their fully expressed identities has also been cited as a barrier (Pacey *et al.*, 2019). Research has also been somewhat limited to the merits of preventing youth involvement, to avoid potential harm. However, the benefits of their engagement is clear and include increased critical consciousness (Conner *et al.*, 2023), youth feeling validated and important (Young *et al.*, 2023) and increased youth engagement in a variety of settings, including civic engagement and volunteering (Crocetti *et al.*, 2014). The quality of current engagement in a range of activities may also be enhanced (Martinez *et al.*, 2017).

In the context of the community non-profit organization at the heart of this study, the Lab has become a way for the organization to authentically perform its mission, vision and purpose. As a youth-focused organization with a research and education mandate, the Lab was a purpose-built program, that achieved more than it set out to do. The initial goals were to

engage youth in research and instead, it became both an award-winning scholarly Lab [6] producing a novel form of YPAR and an effective developmental and educational program for youth, with tangible benefits expressed by both youth and their educators. As a result, the organization has evolved its description of the program to include both aims (as a research lab and a developmental program), simultaneously describing the Lab as:

An award-winning research lab, conducting cutting edge youth focused research. We are researching youth perspectives (ages 15–18) on a range of issues that matter to youth.

And

As a developmental opportunity for youth, the Lab is a context-driven, information literacy intervention program that promotes evidence-based approaches, critical thinking, and advocacy. We instill the skills necessary for thoughtful engagement with information sources while building transferable skills that will serve youth in school, work, and life.

The implications for management and organizational studies are two-fold: (1) it is possible to engage youth in authentic ways in formal organizational spaces where they can contribute to the objectives of the organization and (2) their involvement has the potential to produce unanticipated benefits both for the organization and for the youth. However, the caution is that this engagement needs to be authentic, and youth should help drive what their engagement looks like. It also needs to make sense for the organization. This study may be most useful to other community organizations serving youth. As such, the community non-profit organization operating the Lab has established a network of approximately 45 such organizations who can readily access these insights.

In terms of some of the implications for education, I think it is important to highlight just how impressed and surprised I was by what the youth in the Lab could achieve. The Lab has evolved over four cohorts with various adjustments to both challenge youth and promote their engagement. Some examples include the youth researchers' ability to complete the ethics course which speaks to a certain cognitive ability, language fluency and critical thinking, through to the deep debates and discussions we enjoy in the Lab, which are always interesting and thought-provoking. Some literature points out that youth receive an exaggerated amount of criticism for caring too little about their personal education and about the society in which they live (Good *et al.*, 1999). More recent research has investigated a range of topics from what should be at the heart of the secondary education experience including environmental sustainability (Dunlop *et al.*, 2022) through to varied student-life trajectories. I believe that we cannot possibly achieve everything inside of the present school system, nor can we underestimate the potential of youth. Formal educational opportunities will never be sufficient and there needs to be spaces where youth can express their full selves and not face "passion shame" or bounded empowerment. The Lab, along with other youth-focused community programs, represent such holistic spaces where youth can live, learn and play.

7. Conclusion

I am loving this experience and have learned so much about research studies and how they work, and it has really opened my mind to the world of research and how important it is ~ Youth Researcher

As part of my writing process with this paper, I found myself wanting to provide as much detail as possible as to how I worked with youth, in addition to the insights from our study. I have two reasons for doing this. First, I wanted to share one way to engage with youth meaningfully in practice. I believe that this model of engagement surfaces insights for youth-focused community non-profit organizations. Second, I am hoping to inspire other researchers to work with younger youth in research about youth. I think it can be a rewarding experience for all concerned.

This paper set out to answer the question: how can youth help us understand youth empowerment? The answer to this question is in part methodological, as the process to engage youth in understanding a phenomenon may take many approaches and I elected to build a space whereby I could both investigate such a question, but also engage youth in the investigation and analysis. The second part is based on the insights achieved, which I believe were far richer than had I taken an approach to interview youth directly on their perceptions and ideas. I had both the data we collected from the participants and the insights from our youth researchers to consider. The contributions are thus both the model of youth participatory action research created in the Lab and contributions to our understanding of youth empowerment (as informed by youth perspectives).

The Lab is currently wrapping up with the fourth cohort – this is the second cohort supporting our second study (on youth engagement). The approach to this inquiry has been developed by the previous cohort, who designed the questions and determined what the natural follow up to a study on youth empowerment should be. As the Lab continues to carry out primary research on issues that concern youth, I will be taking my lead from our youth in the Lab. I have every confidence they will continue to lead me in both interesting and important directions.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank Dalhousie University, the University of Eastern Finland, Acadia University and Prudentia Institute: Youth Knowledge Exchange for their support. The author would also like to thank the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development of Nova Scotia and specifically Kim Duncan and, Tom McCutcheon and Andrew Seymour. The author would like to acknowledge and thank the students in our 2022/2023 cohorts of the Student Research Lab for their invaluable contributions and partnership: Taylor Hame, Eli Brittain, Megan Hollery, Breanna MacPhee, Carter Fitzner, Maverick Leonard, Hazel Amirault, Cameron Gallant, James Stretch, Marshall MacIsaac, Josh Runas, Chloe Manuel, Abdul Alsayasneh, Mohammad Esmael and Clyde Burns along with their teachers Brian Shay, John Chiasson, Dean Stevenson, Melissa Doherty, Chris Walker, Anthony McInnis, Grant Frost and Carl Peori. The author would like to thank the 2023-2024 cohort for their insights into the Lab experience: Sav Mcgrath, Zofya Handley, Luther Stronach, Hannah Mainwaring, Maxx Dominey, Elandra Kenny, Vicky Martinez, Sofia Tomek, Ethan Morse, Sam Davis, Rebekah Levy, Makaylee Tidd, Dawn Fredricks and Myfanwy Pozzolo; and their teachers Mike Smith, Jen Hall, Heather Hiscock, Nancy Litwin, Adam Bunin, Donald Beck, Rebekah Wheadon and Jonathan Marshall. A special thanks is owed to research assistant, Becca Mian.

Funding: The author discloses receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by MITACs Accelerate Entrepreneurship Program, Research Nova Scotia, the Berkeley Ltd, Atlantic Windows, WM Fares Group, HanMac Capital, MICCO Companies and Stuart P. Rath.

Notes

1. The community-based non-profit organization is Prudentia Institute. The Institute is a registered charity in Canada. The Canadian University partner is located in Atlantic Canada. The Department of Education is a provincial government agency that oversees primary to grade 12 education in a public school system. The Department of Education oversees co-operative learning opportunities which are considered career exploration activities hosted in community and business settings, outside of the formal classroom. The research lab is an approved community host.
2. A note to readers, I elect to take a personal approach to writing which flows from my onto-epistemological lens as a critical feminist scholar, therefore, some of the writing style herein is personal in style and draws on the tradition of writing differently (Ahonen *et al.*, 2020; Gilmore *et al.*, 2019).

3. In Summer of 2023, I changed university affiliations, and the Lab's location has moved with me. I began the Lab at Dalhousie University and then moved to Acadia University. Throughout, I maintained my affiliation at the University of Eastern Finland.
4. For more information about the graduate competency, see Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training, the Atlantic Canada Framework for Essential Graduation Competencies: https://www.ednet.ns.ca/files/curriculum/atlantic_canada_essential_grad_competencies.pdf
5. I have included this feedback here because I believe it is instructive to researchers. It was my experience that you need to satisfy several stakeholders in order to work directly with youth. The tangible benefits for youth have to be clear and ongoing.
6. This paper won best all-conference paper at a recent academic conference (Atlantic Schools of Business Conference, 2023).

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