

Youth Challenging Community: between hope and stigmatization¹

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from two research studies: Assets Coming Together for Youth (ACT for Youth); and, Engaging Girls Changing Communities (EGCC). ACT for Youth was a collaborative university-community research study designed to understand youth perspectives on well-being and encourage positive youth development in the historically stigmatized Jane-Finch community, located in North-Western Toronto, Canada. EGCC investigated how young women engage in leadership and civic activities in new urban environments; further, it specifically sought to identify enhancers and barriers to community participation that girls face in their everyday lives. Both ACT for Youth and EGCC legitimize the framework in which youth are presented as assets with possibilities, as sources of knowledge and power, as well as agents of social change with competencies to critically examine the world around them and their participation in it. Further, these projects illustrate that innovative youth participatory methods can provide an opportunity to gain insight into the lives of young people that is grounded in their perspectives and their capabilities. This paper draws on data collected by and from youth and it explores how narratives of violence and well-being produce, trouble, and disrupt the notion of youth criminality and hopelessness. Data also illustrates how youth can engage in initiatives that help address community issues. Additionally, the paper offers methodological insights on the value of engaging youth through research as well as ideas on how such undertakings can foster or hinder the production of bridging social capital.

Keywords

Youth based ethnography – Photovoice – Positive youth development – Community engagement – Gender empowerment.

I- I would like to acknowledge the Social Sciences Humanities Research Canada for funding the research studies whose data are used in this paper.

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Os jovens desafiam a comunidade: entre a esperança e a estigmatização

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Resumo

Este artigo apresenta conclusões resultantes de dois projetos de pesquisa: Assets Coming Together for Youth (ACT for Youth) [Reunindo os valores e recursos dos jovens]; e Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC) [Envolvendo as jovens, e transformando as comunidades]. O ACT for Youth consiste num projeto universitário de pesquisa colaborativa cuja finalidade é compreender as perspectivas dos jovens em relação ao bem-estar, e estimular o desenvolvimento positivo da juventude na comunidade de Jane-Finch, uma região historicamente estigmatizada, situada no noroeste de Toronto, no Canadá. O projeto EGCC examinou o modo pelo qual as jovens se envolvem em atividades cívicas e de liderança, em novos meios urbanos; além disso, tentou identificar, em particular, aspectos que estimulam a participação comunitária das jovens, bem como os obstáculos com os quais elas se deparam em tal participação. Ademais, estes projetos são a demonstração de que métodos inovadores de participação dos jovens nos permitem uma melhor compreensão sobre a vida deles, a partir do conhecimento de suas perspectivas e habilidades. Este artigo baseia-se em dados coletados pelos jovens, e examina de que modo as narrativas sobre violência e bem-estar criam, problematizam e desestruturam conceitos como a criminalidade e a desesperança juvenis. Os dados também ilustram a maneira como os jovens são capazes de envolver-se com iniciativas voltadas a questões da comunidade. Além disso, o artigo oferece reflexões metodológicas sobre a importância de envolver os jovens em pesquisas, além de ideias sobre como estas iniciativas podem promover ou impedir a produção de um capital social na forma de vínculos [bonding social capital].

Palavras-chave

Etnografia baseada nos jovens – Photo voice – Desenvolvimento positivo dos jovens – Envolvimento na comunidade – Autonomia de gênero.

I- Gostaria de agradecer ao Social Sciences Humanities Research Canada pelo financiamento do projeto de pesquisa, cujos dados constituem a base deste artigo.

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Introduction and background

This paper presents the identity positioning of youth of African descent and their patterns of civic engagement in the Canadian polity. The paradigm presented here illustrates how youth construct and negotiate their identities, how they identify and associate themselves to others, and how others identify them, mediate methods and levels of participation in their communities. Central to this paradigm is youth's development of social capital, which is important to processes of becoming active and engaged citizens. Furthermore, in this paper, I present case studies of youth community engagement conducted with youth in Canada. These studies illustrate the complexities faced by youth of African descent in Toronto (and elsewhere) who attempt to live their lives between and against ensuing stereotypes and stigmatization.

Studies of youth identity and civic engagement indicate that in many nation states, youth positions range from that of deviant troublemakers to political activist to change agents. That youth can fall into all or any one of these categories has been the prevalent challenge facing critical ethnographers interested in working with youth to address the ambiguous representation of their identities and participation in their communities.

Exemplifying studies that examine this ambiguous youth positioning and community participation in both the global South and the North are studies that I conducted in South Africa and Canada, respectively. In the global South, a study of youth, identity and politics illustrated the key role that young people played in the struggle against apartheid South Africa; yet, these youth were obscurely positioned as perpetrators of violence on the one hand, and change agents on the other hand (DLAMINI, 2008). Evidently, among others, youth activities laid the foundation for present-day South Africa, and as records indicate, youth continue to play key roles in challenging and changing

repressive state practices in independent South Africa¹. Dlamini (2008) initiated questions about the processes that were to allow these youth to transition from freedom fighters (mainly characterized by violent activity), to nation builders in post-apartheid South Africa. The social capital that youth had developed enabled them to survive not just the political turmoil that engulfed the country at that time, but also allowed them to survive the economic hardships and cultural challenges that marked this era and the suffering that accompanied such struggles². In the 'new' South Africa, former youth, ill-equipped to compete in a shrinking economy, found themselves without jobs, and are problematically referred to by the media as "the lost generation" (see, for example, Eleanor Swartz's 2012 brief but compelling newsworthy article, "Youth Caught between Reality and Promise").

Resulting from Dlamini (2008), questions about resources linked to processes of transition from violence to peaceful democracy led to an investigation that looked at how youth who had migrated to Canada from war-torn African countries learnt to participate and be active citizens in the new homeland as well as how to "become" Canadian³ (DLAMINI et al, 2009). This study was interested in investigating ways in which civic participation is linked to the development and deployment of social capital (BOURDIEU 1982; PUTMAN 1993, 2000) and youth identity. Although limited in its category of participants, in that it involved only those youth who had experienced war and violence, this investigation revealed that bonding social

1- An impressive example is the role that youth played in challenging the position and actions of South Africa's second president, Thabo Mbeki, with regards to importing very needed HIV drugs for treatment from other countries.

2- Dlamini (2008) details mainly bonding social capital as having been instrumental in youth securing part time jobs, for example, as a way of supporting themselves in a period where the standard family constituted of two (working) parents was being relinquished.

3- In writing about racialized identity, Dei (1997) distinguishes between "being black" (i.e. given a racial identity) and "becoming black" (i.e., relating to the racialized identity in a politically engendered way). The latter allows for a development of "a 'resistant' identity and to link such politicized identity to social practice" (DEI; JAMES, 1998, p. 93).

capital (elaborated below), that is, networks with people like them, racially and culturally, was what allowed these youth to settle and be engaged citizens. Further, Dlamini et al. (2009) revealed that relying solely on bonding social capital, which derives mainly from country of origin-informed resources, limited youth from African communities to realize their Canadian dream – however defined this might have been. Realizing the sometimes-confining parameters of bonding social capital, subsequent studies have focused on investigating barriers and facilitators to community participation; also, in their efforts to help bridge social capital, these studies have involved youth in all activities and have mapped the methodological successes and limits of their approaches. The following sections document these studies and highlight methodology-related lessons as well as discuss the production and deployment of social capital and its relation to community engagement.

Civic engagement and social capital

Civic engagement, as used within the context of this paper, refers to developing Canada's diverse peoples into active citizens who have both the capacity and opportunity to participate in shaping the future of their communities and country. Central to an understanding of civic engagement and participation is the concept of social capital, which links many sociological concepts (reciprocity, cooperation, community, networks, sanctions, information channels, trust, etc.), to explain diverse social issues across multiple disciplines. The explosion of research on social capital, particularly the concept as used by Putnam, (1993a, 1993b, 1995, & 2000) has produced an impressive body of results confirming its relation to and effects within the domains of the economy, politics, social structure, education, social control, crime, intergroup relations, social mobility, lifestyles, and health. This engaging concept offers us the

opportunity to link and understand mutually reinforcing and interrelated aspects of human behaviour at the individual, family, group, organizational, community and societal levels (SCHRIVER, 2001).

Despite the impressive and positive outcomes associated with this concept (Coleman, 1988; Saegert; Winkel; Swartz, 2002), there is growing recognition that there are disadvantages to the processes that build and maintain it. Examples are when groups use their social capital to exclude others and deny them opportunities that limit their social mobility, consequently contributing to intergenerational inequalities as well as the negative social capital found in certain social networks such as inner-city youth gangs and mafia families (PORTES; LANDOLT, 1996). It is necessary to also critically question the 'taken for granted' assumption that social capital benefits communities and households regardless of ethnic and racial group membership. If social capital is defined as "networks with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within and among groups" (OECD, 2001), it cannot be free from inequalities that arise from structural power differences in society that contribute to the many disadvantages certain groups experience in different spheres of their life course because "power relations are rooted in the system of social networks" (FOUCAULT, 1982).

In the light of the controversial group use of social capital, it becomes important to explore one of the factors influencing the identity formation and civic participation of youth of African descent in Canada, which is the history of racial marginalization, social and cultural forms of discrimination. That is, despite multicultural and other diversity-based policies for which Canada is globally reputable, minority youth in general, and those of African descent in particular, still face multiple barriers including racial discrimination that limit their access to social and economic opportunities and mediate ways of civic engagement. Put

differently, regardless of the federal policy of multiculturalism that legitimizes the efforts of members of visible minorities to maintain their cultures and still integrate into 'Canadian culture', Isin and Siemiatycki (1999) point out that there is a more problematic reality in Toronto where many immigrant groups occupy a marginal position in the social space. The authors note that participation and influence over the city's economic, social, cultural and political spheres has eluded many members of immigrant groups. The Ethnic Diversity Survey by Statistics Canada (2003) shows that first generation newcomers are less engaged in civic participation in groups or organizations in Canada. Taylor (1992) argues that the lack of political recognition of ethno-cultural minority identities represents the core problem for minorities.

Another mediating civic engagement factor draws on information of how, over the past two decades, many of the people emigrating from the African continent arrive in Canada with diverse experiences of hardship emanating from wars, poverty and other socially related problems. As a result of these experiences, who they are as a people and ideas of how and when to participate in their new communities is narrowly understood by the hosting country, and their knowledge of governance is informed by the negative experiences from the repressive regimes of the countries of origin. Many families arriving from countries such as Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Rwanda bring with them experiences of war, poverty, diseases and many other socio-political hardships. A study conducted in Windsor, Ontario (DLAMINI, 2003; DLAMINI et al, 2009) indicated that many of the youth and their parents who arrive in Canada with traumatic experiences, from countries under oppressive regimes, were sceptical and even untrusting of government-based initiatives; also, their understanding of civic participation and what it means to be an involved citizen working towards the development of one's community differed from

those of their Canadian born counterparts. Heller (1987) rightly argues that social injustice entails not only an unfair distribution of goods and resources but includes any norm, social condition, social process or social practice that interferes with or constraints one from fully participating in society. Informed by such an understanding of social injustice, Dlamini, Anucha & George (2006-2008)⁴, Anucha et al, (2009-2014), Dlamini et al. (2010-2014), and, Daniel & Dlamini (2014 - to date) engaged in research studies that aimed to understand the development of inter- and intra- group social networks that result from civic participation, and to unveil related socio-economic benefits. Therefore, the case studies presented here have taken into consideration the role of social capital and of the two mediating factors in youth community participation.

Engaging Toronto youth

The youth, whose ideas we present herein, were part of multiple studies of which the author was either a Principal Investigator, or a co-applicant and led a significant part of a larger community-university research project. Overlapping in time frame, these research projects and their findings are presented in their funding order.

Assets Coming Together for Youth (ACT for Youth): 2009-2014

Funded in 2009, Assets Coming Together for Youth (ACT for Youth) had the overall goal to examine the ways in which community assets (people, resources, etc.) can work together to enhance the lives of youth and be used to create meaningful future possibilities. ACT for Youth had five interconnected working groups that are each designed to investigate a specific

4- Details of the findings from this study are documented in Dlamini, Anucha and Wolfe (2012), *Negotiated Challenges in the Workplace. Affilia: Journal of Women in Social Work*. Of particular interest in this study are the ways that immigrant women used bonding social capital to secure jobs within five years of migrating to Canada.

theme. The data presented here are drawn from the summer 2010 research explorations of the Youth Voices Working Group (YVWG). The YVWG designed mini-projects to engage the youth and uncover their viewpoints on three themes: well-being, violence and turf issues. Specifically, the YVWG asks the questions as follows: What are the perspectives of the youth concerning their needs and well-being? How do the youth understand “turf issues” in their community? How do the youth experience violence in their lives?

In addition, in the summer of 2012, the YVWG was concerned with youth engagement, capacity building and economic actualities; that is, while our focus was on hearing youth voices on these issues, we were also interested in what we call the three ‘e’s: engagement, excitement and empowerment. Through Photo-Voice (PV) and the mobile speakers’ corner⁵, we engaged, excited, and empowered the youth in knowledge building, data collection, and attending to economic realities. Building knowledge involved, among other things, learning how to engage in research while being employed by the project to produce youth-based knowledge and learning how to create space for oneself in society. The youth who were part of the project resided in the Jane-Finch area, which is

5- The MSC consisted of a mobile audio, which was set up at two malls that serve the Jane-Finch area. After being trained by York University researchers and their assistants to learn about the project, related ethical practices and recording skills, youth researchers (YR) were dispersed at the two malls to recruit other youth to conduct self-recordings in response to any one of the three thematic questions mentioned above.

Briefly, the data collection method at the malls went sequentially as follows: (i) youth researchers set up tables at strategic places in the malls with research tools and ACT for Youth banners large enough to attract attention; (ii) when someone entered the mall, the YR approached and informed them about the study, went over research ethics forms and asked them to participate; (iii) if interested, the participant was then given a tape recorder plus the research questions, which were outlined on a piece of paper. The YR then explained the recording protocol and explained that the youth had to respond to only one of the three research questions. Under each of the three questions were subquestions designed to guide (or in a typical interview, probe) the participant into thinking more about the question (see appendix i). (iv) Lastly, tape recorder and questions in hand, the recruited participant would walk away from the YR to a place within visibility of, but not hearing distance to the YR, talk on the tape for about 5 minutes, return the tape and collect his/her \$10 honorarium. In the end, 50 participants were recruited and purposefully selected to fall within the 16-26-age range, and were residents of Jane-Finch.

home to about 80,000 people of diverse racial, ethnic, religious and generational backgrounds (Statistics Canada, 2005) and is characterized by a high concentration of racial and ethnic minorities, low-income housing, gangs, and drug problems. Consequently, it is often viewed as a Canadian equivalent to an American ghetto (O’GRADY; PARNABY; SCHIKSCHNEIT, 2010; JAMES, 2012).

Youth engagement and positive youth development

The study of youth in urban areas has evolved from a framework that focused on the psychology of young people and the opportunity for interventions to improve future behaviors, such as ways to reduce teenage pregnancy, drug abuse and other risky activities (MORROW, 2001), to a framework that focused on the challenges and deficiencies of youth living in low-income environments, and youth not as problems to be studied and managed, but as assets with possibilities (GINWRIGHT; CAMMAROTTA, 2002; FORMAN, 2004) and as sources of knowledge and power (FOX et al. 2010). Pereira (2007) defines youth engagement as empowerment approaches that are about actively involving young people in addressing issues that affect them personally or that they believe to be important. Youth engagement means strengthening youth voices and creating safe spaces where they can discuss and take action about issues that affect their lives.

Studies that structure the youth as assets and knowledge brokers use frameworks that include youth engagement at various levels of life. These studies demonstrate diverse ways and spaces of how and where youth can engage and inform, as assets. For instance, the youth are presented as capable of informing and engaging in participatory action research (GIBSON, 2011; KIRSHNER et al. 2011; LANGHOUT; THOMAS, 2010; MATHEWS et al. 2010; as demonstrated by our ACT for Youth study – ANUCHA et al. 2009-2014). The youth are also viewed

as critically involved in organization and/or program development (KRASNEY; DOYLE, 2002); community planning (CAMPBELL et al. 2010; CHECKOWAY et al, 1995); and, community evaluation (CHECKOWAY and RICHARDS-SCHUSTER, 2003; FOX; CATER, 2011; LONDON et al. 2003). In fact, it is safe to state that while in the past, the youth were perceived as barriers to community development, community development is currently seen as synonymous with youth development (LONDON et al, 2003).

Practices of positive youth engagement are now so widespread that the processes of engagement are becoming part of 'standardized' community work. In the city of Toronto, for example, there are varied initiatives that engage the youth in research, community development and health services. Some of these initiatives are led by the youth themselves, such as a youth-developed citywide survey tool to assess sexual health services for urban youth (FLICKER et al, 2010).

Assets Coming Together for Youth (ACT for Youth): illustrative of arts-based forms of youth engagement

To encourage youth participation, qualitative researchers have increasingly drawn on arts-based forms of inquiry and intervention (e.g. dramatization, story-telling, and, in the case of ACT for Youth, PhotoVoice), which, in turn, has resulted in alternative ways of expressing or seeking ideas (HEATH; SOEP, 1998). Also, visual approaches to research have been used as a way of telling different stories about youth experiences. Visualization is viewed as a creative method that enables the youth to choose and control what they want to 'tell' (MORROW, 2001) and story-telling is further seen as a way for traditionally silenced groups to "come to voice" (Bell HOOKS, as cited in WRIGHT et al. 2010, p. 542).

The Youth Voices Working Group (YVWG) used a participatory arts-based method, PhotoVoice (PV), to engage and hear

youth perspectives on the aforementioned themes (well-being, turf issues and violence). Using the snowballing technique through flyers and youth serving community partners, the PV project recruited participants aged between 16 and 24 and who were members of the Jane-Finch community. To determine that they were members of the community participants were asked for their postal code. Seventy-nine young people were recruited in total and were targeted according to gender, ethno/racial, immigration and age group. The data used in this paper are from the PV well-being theme and use information from 11 participants of South Asian, Black (Caribbean/Africa), Latin American and East Asian descent. This data fall into three categories: 41 annotated photographs, 11 individual interviews, and 3 focus group interview transcripts⁶.

As a methodology, PV evolved out of interplay between Freire's (1972) critical dialogue and ethnographic interviewing. Working with peasants in Brazil, Freire was well-known for his dialogical, problem-solving approach to education, which includes three methodological steps: listening to the community to understand their issues; using problem-posing dialogue to investigate the issues; and, exploring action potentials, or concrete ways to change people's circumstances (WALLERSTEIN; BERNSTEIN, 1988). In the second stage, Freire included the use of 'codes' to engage in the problem-posing dialogue. By 'codes,' Freire was referring to the use of triggers, such as role-plays and photographs to represent the participants' emotional and social responses to focus on discussion about their issues.

Similar to Freire's focus on peasant empowerment, PhotoVoice was first developed by Wang and Burris (1997) as a technique to be used with populations "who have little power themselves, or little access

6- It is important to indicate that the larger ACT for Youth collected other data that informed the analysis of the photos as well. For instance, student survey data were collected in all the eight high schools serving the Jane-Finch area. Also see note ix above.

to those who have power over their lives". The camera, therefore, "becomes their tool, their voice" (ROYCE et al., 2006, p. 81). Further, similar to Freire's codes, in PV, participants are asked to take pictures representing issues that are important in their lives; subsequently, the participants engage in critical analysis (dialogue) using the SHOWeD framework to develop a narrative explaining their photos. The findings are then shared within the community through an action activity agreed upon by the participants. The action component of PV is multifaceted; it includes action to connect the youth to one another, to inform local governments, or to engage other youth in their local communities. As a participatory action method, PV focuses on the capabilities of the youth participants as experts of their own experiences and aims to incite civic engagement within communities. The role of the researcher "[...] is to serve as a resource to those being studied... as an opportunity for them to act effectively in their own interest" (RUBBIN; BABBIE, 2005, p. 439). Below is a description of how PV was used to hear their voices on wellness in the Jane-Finch community.

The PhotoVoice Well-Being Project

Methodologically, the PhotoVoice Well-Being Project followed the typical research protocol in which university investigators request and receive ethics clearance from the related Research Ethics Boards. Once we received the ethics certificates, we began recruiting participants for all 2010 summer ACT for Youth themed projects. The PV Well-Being Project was conducted over a period of three weeks, with activities that could be divided into three themed qualitative focuses: knowledge building; conceptualization; and, action. First, over two focus group meetings, the participants worked with trained research assistants to learn about research and related ethical practices

(consent, data collection) and to develop their photography skills. Following the two knowledge building focus meetings, the youth met to conceptualize the research question. Specifically, the youth were introduced to the research questions and were engaged in a critical discussion about their perspective on community needs and well-being. The following questions guided the discussion; as well, they guided the youth as they set out to take photographs in their community: What does community mean to you? What is strength in your community? What is needed in your community? How do you define well-being? How do you know when you are doing well? What do you consider your needs in your community? The youth were encouraged to explore these questions by paying attention to social relationships, housing, health, education, employment, and community organizations.

With cameras and 'operational guidelines' at hand, the youth went on field trips to take the photographs. Once the photos were taken, the youth were interviewed individually about the photos they took; that is, during the interview, they elaborated on their understanding of well-being as represented in two of their chosen images. Also, they were guided to create narratives of the photos, which could be used to share their views with each other, as well as for public consumption and action. After the completion of the individual interviews, the youth came together in another focus group where photographs were shared and discussed anonymously, that is, without the revealing the photographer's identity.

The individual interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, with consent, and transcribed for detailed analysis. Research data, including photographs and interview and focus group transcripts, were first analyzed by the YVWG co-chairs, together with the research assistants, to get an overall sense of the findings⁷. Following this analysis, all members

7- Each of the ACT for Youth working groups is co-chaired by a community and an academic project co-applicant. The YVWG valued the combination

of the YVWG (members from community organizations and academics) and the youth were invited to look at the data and contribute to its interpretation. In all stages of analysis, YVWG graduate assistants were present to document the interpretations, which were later incorporated to, and aligned with, the themes that had been organized by the PV participants in their final focus group meeting. In the end, data were marked with codes, which had been extracted from the text. The codes were then grouped into concepts and categories, which made up the final themes. The coding was done line-by-line, without the use of any coding software.

A few methodological glitches, which resulted in modifications to some methodological processes, are worth acknowledging. One modification regarded time whereby the project was originally planned to happen over a six-week period; however, because of attrition rates, it was reduced to three weeks. In the three-week period, nearly the same volume of material was covered, which may have undermined some of the initial goals of the research, such as providing the youth with ethnographic know-how. Studies have shown that the longer the youth stay involved in a project, the more their critical analysis skills develop and their confidence increases (STACK et al. 2004; WRIGHT et al. 2010). The short time frame may have affected the quality of the youth's photographs; in that, what they captured may have been influenced more by a forced deadline than inspiration. Also, the short time frame made it challenging to systematically determine whether or not the youth developed meaningful critical skills; however, anecdotal information pointed to increased levels of confidence.

In the end, the action component of the project was compromised because of challenges faced in organizing the youth to disseminate their photos at a planned summer gala hosted by ACT for Youth. As a result, YVWG devised other

of academic and community based expertise in analyzing the data because it provided nuanced and authenticity to the interpretation of youth representations.

forums and times for the action component. This modification has rendered positive results by keeping some of the youth involved beyond the summer PV initiative and has made them participate in knowledge mobilization of the PV findings. Overall therefore, youth involvement in the YVWG summer 2010 projects ensured that the explorations remained within the vernacular of the Jane-Finch community and provided a rich opportunity for the youth to gain meaningful employment, skills and access to the university.

Findings and discussion

The data analysis revealed that the youth took photographs that could be categorized under three broad strands. First, were photographs that portrayed community togetherness, resilience and accomplishment. These were photos that depicted activities of social life in the community and were identified as positive contributors to well-being. Second, were photographs that were indicative of the absence of well-being. These were photos that showed decaying physical environments within the community and are referred to as barriers to well-being. Third, were photographs that detracted from well-being, which were discussed as symbols that reduced well-being. It is important to note that the symbols that were considered to reduce or undermine well-being, such as racism and discrimination, were those that the youth found most difficult to capture photographically.

Through the accounts of their experiences of well-being, community, and violence, the youth and other residents of Jane-Finch challenge and disrupt narratives that explain the success of youth as merely the result of individual effort, and negatively portray the community where they belong. A dynamic interaction of these narratives can be introduced by a metaphor of roses growing in a harsh environment. Searching for images that illustrated her experiences of well-being,

a young woman photographed neglected roses growing in a bush. Asked to describe the picture and discuss why she took it, she says:

An image of roses is shown in contrast to the desolate areas beside it filled with weeds. The roses are colourful in full bloom, which further shows the contrast between the two. This photo relates to well-being because it shows hope. Hope is an important thing that humans possess in order to live happily. Similarly, the roses in this picture are facing obstacles that prevent them from surviving. Although the plants are being neglected, the roses continue to bloom beautifully and live on.

Photo 1- Rose bush



While this image can be seen as a beautiful illustration of youth resilience, it may also help perpetuate negative images of the community where they belong. This negative image is present in several narratives of youth and other residents from Jane-Finch. Two youths, for example, shared the following thoughts in short interviews:

In Jane-Finch you get robbed out here, you get killed out here. A lot of bad things can happen to you out here.

[Parents] just don't care [...] if their children are involved in crimes, gangs or violence. All they care is having a baby and they don't have a chance to come home and [...] take care of their children. Every day they will just go to work and come home, they don't see their children at home and they just let their children run free do whatever they want [...] Sometimes they go shoplifting, sometimes they sell marijuana, sometimes they fight for their friends and they go to jail for that. Basically this area is a concentration of newcomers and not many people are educated and the parents don't care about them.

However, the narratives that portray Jane-Finch as a "troubled" community coexist with counter-narratives that draw attention to aspects often overlooked by dominant views of urban youth and the communities where they belong. These alternative narratives draw attention to "the whole picture." The positive and negative aspects of Jane-Finch point out to the importance of family and community on the well-being of urban youth, and signal to the structural constraints to well-being experienced by the youth in their everyday lives.

A narrative that draws attention to the "whole picture" of Jane-Finch is captured by a picture of a half-dead, half-alive tree. The photographer said:

What this symbolizes is the positives and negatives in life. [...] There are many people that stereotype Jane-Finch as a negative area to reside but Jane-Finch has a lot of positive things going on for the people in the area.

Narratives of trust, community, family, diversity and care can be found in several accounts by the Jane-Finch youth, providing a counter-narrative to the negative

Photo 2- Tree



images that dominate public perception of the neighborhood. This counter-narrative is illustrated in an excerpt from a short interview:

I really love the Jane-Finch community. To me, it's home and I'm proud to say it is home. I think there are a lot of really good benefits to living here. I love the diversity and all the different cultures, and that sort of thing. I just feel lucky to be part of the community. [...] There are a ton of great people in the community. I feel pretty safe, and pretty comfortable with people and the places I've seen over the 17 years I've been living here. [...] I've met a ton of amazing people here and it gets to a point where a lot of people are so close that it is like family.

A picture showing a community barbecue at a public park conveys the notion of the Jane-Finch community protecting their children. The youth who took this picture explains:

The picture shows what my community does for the kids, making the kids safe in the community [...] it is showing kids enjoying themselves and eating good food.

Most interviewees are aware of the ways in which larger socio-economic structures constrain opportunities for youth. They point to the poor maintenance of public housing buildings and the insufficiency of education,

Photo 3- Free Food (Community Barbecue)



employment, and recreation opportunities as conditions that create stress and lead to domestic and street violence. The following account speaks to the lack of sufficient and adequate spaces for recreation and its effects on the youth:

I've noticed that around Jane Finch community there's not a lot of resources as you know Jane Finch is not a really big community. All we have is one public swimming pool, you know, I don't see any camping or programs for young kids, young adults you know, stuff for them to do. That's why they have nothing else to do than to get into drugs, alcohol, violence, because they don't have a recreation center where they can go hang out, get help with homework, talk about issues, have somewhere to hang around then something to do.

The words from one youth nicely capture the need to create and expand spaces for recreation and opportunities for education, employment and youth engagement in Jane-Finch:

We need more resources, we need to stop shutting our programs down. Our programs, our music programs for youth all

over the city, community kitchens, food, banks, we need more access [...] What we need is proper allocation of the money. The youth need to know that they have a future other than the streets, and if you're not gonna help, we're just gonna keep, y'know, self-destruction, that's what it is, and that's gonna keep happening, and it needs to stop. People need to come out into the communities and give, give back to the communities, give us more time to demonstrate our creativity, give us access, give us resources, give venues, give us locations, give us funding, give us grants, let us know about our education rights. It's a human necessity and a human right, I believe it's very important and it's lacking.

Using the metaphor of roses growing in concrete to make reference to urban youth thriving against the odds (DUNCAN-ANDRADE, 2009)⁸, this project pointed out to the limitations of dominant narratives that idealize individual roses while stigmatizing the environment where they grow and neglecting the larger socio-economic structures that constrain youth opportunities (seeing communities, and not the larger socio-economic constraints such as the concrete). The accounts from the youth and other residents from Jane-Finch offer a counter-narrative that highlights the important role that families and communities play in ensuring youth development and well-being (seeing communities as the roots that allow roses to grow in concrete), and point out the need to address the structural constraints that limit opportunities for urban youth (softening the concrete and, maybe more

audaciously, doing the work to turn Jane-Finch into a rose garden).

Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC): 2011 - 2014

Engaging Girls, Changing Communities: Examining Girls' Processes of Civic Engagement and Leadership (EGCC) was a three-year community-university research project that examined girls' conception and experiences with leadership and civic engagement in new urban environments. This participatory action study strived to respond to concerns that girls' potential for civic activities and leadership positions will remain untapped if new ways of nurturing girls' leadership are not pursued. EGCC promoted the development of girls as future leaders and encouraged young women to deconstruct and re-conceptualize leadership in their own terms.

Engaging Girls, Changing Communities was methodologically framed by the Community Dialogue Approach (ANUCHA, 2007; ANUCHA et al. 2006, 2007), which is a framework that was used in previous projects that informed its formation (ANUCHA 2009-2014; DLAMINI, 2005-2008). With elements of traditional action research, the Community Dialogue Approach conceptualizes community engagement as a methodological practice and research as a community dialogue that must fully engage community stakeholders. Community partners are extensively involved in defining the focus and implementation of research. The Community Dialogue Approach emphasizes the use of multi-methods and encourages applied research that is meaningful to the community and yet maintains scientific merit.

Methodologically similar to Act for Youth, the Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC) project followed the typical research protocol in which university investigators request and receive ethics clearance from the related research ethics boards. Thereafter, EGCC

8- Although academically associated with Duncan-Andrade, it is important to acknowledge this metaphor as coined by the gangster rapper, Tupac Shakur, which goes as follows: The Rose That Grew from Concrete "Did you hear about the rose that grew from a crack in the concrete? Proving nature's laws wrong, it learned to walk without having feet. Funny, it seems to be keeping its dreams; it learned to breathe fresh air. Long live the rose that grew from concrete when no one else even cared." Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/181246-the-rose-that-grew-from-concrete>.

embarked on activities that could be catalogued into three stages. First, was a community forum that engaged the community partners and youth representatives. At this forum, the project was introduced, investigative questions and proposed methods were discussed and, where necessary, modified, and methods for various ways of participating were presented. Second, was the employment and hiring of youth researchers to conduct interviews with other youth. A faculty researcher conducted this training with a seasoned doctoral student who was also a researcher in the project. Following the training, youth researchers conducted and transcribed interviews. These interviews were followed by an end-of-year celebration forum that, similarly to the first forum, brought together community-university partners to discuss the next steps of the projects as well as to have the youth researchers share their interviewing experiences. The third stage of EGCC involved facilitating youth-led community initiatives, which had the overarching objective of introducing novel avenues of engaging young women and girls in leadership and community activities. Furthermore, the partnerships with community organizations purposed the harmonization of the actual leadership aspirations of young women and girls with existing leadership programs that community organizations offer. Overall then, EGCC was designed to counteract gender imbalance in both Canadian community and political life. Furthermore, the EGCC project played an instrumental role in facilitating knowledge mobilization on leadership and civic engagement.

Findings: youth researchers in *Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC)*

Interviewing stage: benefits and constraints

The EGCC project recruited eight female youth researchers (YR) whose selection was purposive (GALL; BORG; GALL, 1996; RISTOCK;

GRIEGER, 1996), focusing on girls 16 to 22 years who were enrolled in education institutions (i.e. high schools, colleges or universities). These female youth researchers included five African Canadians, two Caribbean Canadians and one Turkish Canadian; altogether they conducted 51 interviews from other youth who were also of similar ages and the majority (39) of whom were ethnic minorities. Additionally, EGCC funded 12 youth-led community initiatives; the first of these was proposed and piloted by the YR (discussed in the following pages).

In all stages, youth researchers (YR) were encouraged to keep journals to use for reflecting on each activity. The first activity that the YR engaged in was learning to interview. At this stage, the YR worked with a faculty member over a period of 15 hours to learn about conducting qualitative research. The training required that the YR do preliminary readings and arrive prepared to discuss questions and otherwise inform the training session.

This training included discussions regarding research ethics, interviewing strategies, how to generate probing questions, and how to transcribe audio recorded interviews. The YR also participated in mock interviews with each other, and then completed a reflection sheet regarding their training experiences. For the second part of their training, the YR were instructed to conduct a 15-20 minute interview with a young woman who may have something interesting to say about girls and leadership. The transcripts and reflection sheets from these interviews were used to provide feedback to the YR in order to improve their skills. Reflection sheets indicate that on the one hand the YR benefited from the training because it developed ethical lenses, taught them critical skills that they would use to look at their environment and the context of their interviewing, as well as empowered them to work with their peers. On the other hand, however, the YR expressed frustration with the training materials stating that it was difficult to comprehend and that it took a long time to

go through. At the same time, the YR felt that researchers were not ready to help them to break down the material or to even acknowledge its level of difficulty.

Interviews began shortly after the training and, for each interview, YR were required to immediately reflect on it through journaling. Journal data indicate that youth researchers reported nervousness, or little confidence pertaining their interviewing skills at the initial stage of the process. As one youth wrote:

“What I found most challenging is assuming the interviewer role as usually I am the subordinate”.

Another one stated:

“This was my first interview and I was extremely nervous”.

Journal data following the first interviews indicate more gains than challenges on the part of the YR. One of the gains evident from all YR’s reflection journals is that all had points of convergent with some of the responses participants gave to the interview questions. In this way, the YR expressed being able to relate and connect to the participants’ values, which ultimately led to some form of “bonding”. As one YR explained:

Out of all my interviewees thus far she is the closest to my values and views. All of the answers she gave I agreed a hundred percent with all of them.

Or, as another stated,

“I can relate to her in her feelings of wanting her family as a whole to be closer”.

Perhaps because of this bonding scenario, when hearing challenging experiences, the YR sometimes felt that they had to ‘protect’ the participants; that is, they ‘felt’ the participants’ pain. Moreover, this connection to participants often presented a challenge in that the YR expressed hardship holding their opinions in order to not influence the responses. The following two quotes are illustrative, respectively:

“When listening to her I felt more like I needed to help her and protect her, and at times I felt like I was straying from my task”.

Another youth researcher wrote:

“My main concern was to abstain from challenging her comments”.

The most documented gain by the YR during interviewing was learning, which included learning about the subject of investigation, that is, leadership and community participation as well as learning how to conduct research and about themselves. Commenting about having learnt how to articulate long held thoughts, one YR remarked:

I learnt so much from the girl’s point when she said guys don’t take girls seriously even when they are leaders. I kind of had the feeling but I never actually took that in.

Similarly, another YR revealed the following:

I particularly enjoyed her thoughts on some of the major barriers women face. Her critique on the portrayal of women in the media and how it affects women in a holistic manner (self-esteem, self-image, relationship between man and women, and between women and women) was very insightful.

Gains and constraints of YR’s community intervention activity

Following the interviewing stage, the YR were given the opportunity to work with the researchers to share their interviewing experiences, analyze the data through reading and creating themes of the transcribed scripts and share emerging findings at a forum that involved the community and other related stakeholders. At the symposium the YR shared their experiences through creative presentations⁹, which were

⁹ - While most youth used mainly PowerPoint as the main medium, some youth created videos, photography, etc. to enhance their presentations.

followed by discussion sessions on the challenges and barriers to girls' leadership, strategies to overcome these challenges (including strategies that the girls themselves can utilize).

Subsequently to the forum, the YR were given a chance to identify a pressing issue within their community and design a corresponding intervention initiative. With the support of a Project Coordinator and funds, the YR developed an initiative entitled *Naturality: The Strength of a Girl*. This youth-driven initiative was designed to increase girls' understanding on healthy eating and physical activity. Additionally, the initiative sought to heighten girls' critical consciousness of dangerous and unrealistic ideals of body images and build young women's capacity to engage in civic activities and advocacy work relating to healthy living. Informed by their personal observations and experiences, as well as the 2011 report from Public Health Canada on health issues among Canadian youth, the YR devised a day retreat comprising of healthy living workshops and iterative physical activities, which attracted a total of 20 girls between the ages of 16-20 years from Toronto.

At the end of the retreat, participants completed a survey in which they responded to the questions: How has the retreat affected your views or perceptions of physical activity and healthy eating? In what way has your attitude towards taking action in promoting healthy living changed? How has the experience broadened, changed or deepened your understanding of negative influences on body image? To disseminate the project results and maintain the relationship with the girls who attended the retreat, a blog was created. Essentially, the blog served as a platform for the youth researchers, the youth attendees and the other girls from the broader community to share their experiences, lessons and ideas on healthy living and physical activity in the urban environment.

Based on the feedback received during the debriefing sessions, the YR viewed

the community intervention activity as an invaluable component of the research process especially because they were able to construct a project that directly corresponded with their interest and offered them the chance to engage in community development as the primary interventionists. This conception of research coincides with the Community Dialogue Approach ideological framework, in which research is understood as an academic and community-focused endeavour with significant practice and policy implications. Aside from the benefit of contributing to community development, the participation in the community intervention activity also created further employment and skills development opportunities for the YR. The YR expressed their satisfaction with the level of autonomy and the sense of agency that they were endowed with during the community intervention activity. Key challenges enunciated included the amount of resources provided and the longevity of the initiated project. For instance, some of the YR became disengaged shortly after the day of the retreat and did not participate in the blogging element of the community intervention activity while others maintained their involvement and connection with EGCC. Additionally, ideas and suggestions relating to the expansion of the Naturality initiative by the YR and youth participants could not be realized as the allocated resources only allowed for a small-scale initiative.

Nevertheless, the Naturality initiative proved successful as a pilot project and was expedient in mapping the approach, process and methods for the subsequent nine youth-led community initiatives that were undertaken by a group of selected female youth leaders and their team members. All in all, the community intervention demonstrated that if adequately equipped with resources, girls are able to assume leadership roles, participate in community life and function as agents of social change in their communities.

Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC) methodology thoughts

Inspiring youth voices and active participation in youth-based research is strongly advocated in the literature; equally, EGCC is in line with this literature. In addition, EGCC contributes with important information about the processes of youth engagement in research and the complexities that are part of this commitment. First, EGCC is in line with literature advocating research as a learning tool for young people. Accordingly, it is clear from the YR's own documentations that engagement in EGCC provided immense opportunity for the youth to learn from the community, their peers and from the university researchers. But learning mediums were not equally valued by the YR in that book and other tools that to them resembled "school" were shunned. For example, the initial YR training was deemed challenging simply by virtue of including text that needed to be read, that is, "homework". Similarly, activities such as preparing to share preliminary findings following the interview period, and the process of putting in writing details of the YR community initiative, because they required a more 'school like' feature, became more of a challenge and took longer than what was originally envisaged. Thus, the challenge for future research initiatives such as ours is to consider alternative ways of teaching and learning that would be more appealing to the youth.

Second, EGCC is in tune with literature proclaiming that research enables the youth to be change agents in their community, especially when given the tools to analyze and make meaning of their environments (FLANAGAN; GALLAY, 1995). Accordingly, as indicated above, the devotion to the community initiative, *Naturality*, which required a commitment of five hours per week for a consecutive eight weeks to organize, is clear indication of the YR's ability to analyze, discuss with each other, and make a plan towards changing the health and socio-

psychological perspectives of young girls of their age. *Naturality* succeeded in enhancing the knowledge and awareness about healthy living and physical activity of girls living in Toronto. Also, because of the technology savviness of the YR, the creation of a Facebook page and other communication channels meant that the girls were able to create and sustain a network that, although limited, has gone beyond the designed activity.

Third, as researchers, we cannot overemphasize the importance of the insider working with similar others in their community. Engaging youth as primary researchers meant that participants displayed a greater willingness to disclose personal experiences that were sometimes sensitive in nature. By creating a comfortable space and gaining the trust of their peers, the 'insider' youth researchers were able to generate useful data. This finding confirms Powers and Tiffany (2006)'s views, who assert that the participation of youth in research leads to the production of more reliable and meaningful data that may otherwise not have been accessible to traditional, adult driven methods.

Although insiders have had a reputation for having easier access to the community and being able to provide more authentic research accounts, they have also been accused of being intrinsically subjective and too close to the community personally and culturally to be able to capture its nuances (MERRIAM et al. 2001). The involvement of the YR as insiders in EGCC had a positive impact; however, some data suggests caution with regards to the limits of proximity to the community. In EGCC, youth data 'loss' was not because of failure to capture community nuances; rather, it was due to experience sharing moments between the youth researcher and the youth interviewee. During experience-sharing moments, the youth researcher and participants bonded over mutual feelings, thoughts, observations and incidences in a language and jargon that may be unfamiliar to the academic. Further, it is important to note that experience-sharing moments may or may not generate data that align

with the overall research topic. In some instances, the academic is left with the task of consolidating the discord between meaningful data that the youth researcher obtained but might not directly relate to the originally drafted research questions. Powers and Tiffany (2006) point to the potential tension between the expectation of the university researcher and that of the youth researcher. Accordingly, “taking youth voice seriously in participatory research means balancing the conflicting priorities between the needs of the young people and the needs of the research process” (p. 85). As they explain, in certain cases accommodating the needs of youth researchers could result in having incomplete data.

Finally, power dynamics were sometimes at play in EGCC and unplanned for actions that impacted the data collection process and created challenging relations between the YR and university researchers. The project coordinator, who was responsible for overseeing the interviewing and transcribing, often had problems receiving transcripts from the YR and would solicit the assistance of the researchers to nudge the YR into compliance. In this sense, rather than acting as mentors and collaborative leaders, the university researchers sometimes had to assume the role of “research police”. In the end, the data would be received but relations between researchers, some YR and the coordinator was spoiled. Even though this was not a dominant occurrence in EGCC, it is a finding that raises questions about the value of relying on youth to collect data from other youth and the reliability of the data gathered and transcribed. It also raises questions about the value of youth working with other youth in situations where authority channels are established but not necessarily respected to the point where ‘adult’ authority becomes the ultimate way to resolve issues.

In EGCC, we started the research by asking the question, “Is involving the youth as researchers worth it?” We conclude that youth involvement in our research was invaluable and that the learning that occurred

overweighs the pitfalls. Youth researchers learnt ways to create spaces for themselves in the communities in which they worked, gained research and other interpersonal skills, and developed social capital that enabled them to further their educational and professional goals.¹⁰

Following from feminist and critical theorists, Merriam et al. (2001) note that researchers are taking up more nuanced approaches to identity that recognize the intersectional relationship between race, culture, gender, sexuality, class and ability. In this vein, it has become a common practice in many fields for researchers to position themselves in relation to the communities in which they are working (BRIDGES, 2001). All researchers are complexly positioned, and whether explored explicitly or not, this positioning informs everything in our research including data collection, relationship with participants, methodological and theoretical approach. In EGCC, the positioning of YR as girls who were working with other girls opened up the kind of learning and network building that became the basis for the validity of the knowledge construction fundamental to the study. Also, because the study investigated issues of gender leadership and youth engagement, the data provided knowledge not just for the researchers but for the youth researchers as well.

Youth engagement in research is indeed valuable; however, there needs to be better teaching and learning methods that will occupy youth in ways that do not resemble schools and that tap into popular culture and associated contemporary systems of learning. Similarly, future studies need to consider the interplay between adult and youth authority in order to map out the ways that adults support and mentor rather than become police and stand-alone sources of power and authority.

10- For instance, one of the YR who was in high school received admission to university and started her undergraduate study. Another former YR of EGCC is working as Research Assistant at a university.

Social capital lessons from Assets Coming Together for Youth (ACT for Youth) and Engaging Girls, Changing Communities (EGCC)

Conceptually, the ACT for Youth and EGCC projects legitimize the framework in which the youth are presented as assets with possibilities (FORMAN, 2004; GINWRIGHT; CAMMAROTTA, 2002), as sources of knowledge and power (FOX et al, 2010) and as agents of social change (PUTMAN, 2002) with competencies to critically examine the world around them and their participation in it (GIDDENS, 1989). In particular, both projects confirm Shah (2006, p. 2013) stating,

[...] Young people are increasingly seen as active social agents, able to articulate their own experiences and express their views. This shift in thinking has brought, and will continue to bring, new methodological challenges and opportunities for researchers.

Drawing on innovative participatory methods such as PhotoVoice provides an opportunity to gain insight into the lives of young people that is grounded in their perspectives and their capabilities.

Methodologically, as participatory ethnographic studies, both Act for Youth and EGCC developed the research capacities of young people by providing opportunities for them to learn together, collect and analyze the data, engage in community action that impacts the lives of other youth, and importantly, develop networks with researchers, community youth workers, and with other youth. Two important caveats are worthy of articulation.

First, because ACT for Youth was geographically situated within the Jane-Finch area, it is unclear how much bridging social capital youth were able to develop beyond the constraints of these boundaries. That is, as

researchers, we value the concept of “insiders working with insiders” to investigate issues within the community. However, this “insider” status has its limits in that we are unsure whether methodologically it allowed the youth to develop the know-how of reaching out and creating relations with people who are outside and beyond the boundaries of their already existing relations and zones. Working and focussing on youth from this area helped bridge economic barriers because the project provided youth with financial support; it also provided educational guidance and promoted a culture of success, which has resulted in all youth continuing with schooling and looking towards post-secondary education – an undertaking previously considered beyond their reach.

Second, the youth had an over-reliance on each other (in the project and elsewhere) and on the community, all forms of bonding social capital, and may have undermined our goal to work with youth in ways that allow them structural lenses in examining their community. As previously discussed, in the absence of resources and quality institutions, the youth negotiated resource deficiencies through personal and community strengths. As indicated by the photo of a rose growing in the bush, the youth viewed their neighbourhood as one that has managed to provide for itself and its residents irrespective of its low-income status; and, they depend on a strong sense of resilience that gives them pride in overcoming personal obstacles to achieve success. In its overzealousness to nurture the Jane-Finch youth through research involvement and strengthening them as assets, Act for Youth may have minimized or even failed to overtly signal to the structural constraints to well-being that youth experience on their everyday lives.

Related to notions of resilience and community strengths was the interconnection of youth family histories to present circumstances and how this framed youth analysis of well-being and community engagement. As stated, the Jane-Finch area is populated by immigrants

from mainly developing countries whose past experiences are marked by opposing forces: negative encounters (e.g. economic hardships, wars, genocides, political instabilities); and, positive occurrences (e.g. communal existence, extended family structure), all elements that mediate the interpretation of well-being and community engagement in Canada (for details of the consequences of these forces, see DLAMINI et al. 2010). Resilience is built on topographies such as learning to ignore things, finding ways around challenges, accepting suffering (of multiple forms) as part of living, and focusing on individual abilities as key to success. Parents, who were resilient in their homeland, emphasize this construct with their children; consequently, as indicated by the photos and interview transcripts, youth experiences of racism are dealt with through this construct as well as the stressing of the immediate community as a form of (protective) family. Many youth find themselves in “a tug of war”, so to speak, which is a push and pull between confronting racism and other structural barriers head on, while at the same time, using resilience as a way to survive and continue with everyday life.

In EGCC, through journaling, the youth were able to document some of the research joys and challenges that allowed us as researchers to wonder about the value of our

methodology. Evidently, bonding with their peers created a sense of togetherness for youth researchers, while at the same time, presented us with questions of how youth should address points of divergence when they occurred. As one youth researcher documented,

“My main concern was to abstain from challenging her comments”.

Methodologically, research undertakings must seriously consider points of disagreement in similar ways that they consider the bonding that occurs during interview scenarios. It would be interesting, for example, to have instances where youth researchers are given the authority to conduct interviews in their own ways, handling disagreements in ways that they would arise in real life situations and not “abstain from challenging” points that they do not agree with.

Both Act for Youth and EGCC have ended and new projects have been initiated, which has helped avoid what Horowitz et al (2009) term “helicopter research” which is potentially exploitative and quick to leave the investigated community (HOROWITZ et al. 2009). Act for Youth has given birth to a city funded project, Youth Rex, and EGCC to Tikkun Youth. In both cases, participants have continued to utilize the knowledge acquired in previous projects and build the capacities of the youth who worked for their predecessors.

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Received on: 15.01.2015.

Approved on: 24.04.2015.

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