



The Core Connectors Initiative: Development of a Youth Mental Health Program

“...best practices on youth mental health promotion highlight the need for skill building and empowerment... Taken together, the current challenges and opportunities for mental health promotion and literacy illustrate a need to move towards critical mental health literacy that is adapted to adolescent learning, incorporates critical pedagogy, and involves action-oriented skill-building initiatives” (p. 33).

1. WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about the development of the Core Connectors Initiative, a school and community-based mental wellness program aimed at addressing the rising number of mental health issues reported among youth in Canada. The initiative sought to educate youth to improve their mental health literacy, including skills for managing symptoms of their mental health and providing support to their peers. The Core Connectors Initiative trained youth in a dialogue and group-based format to take leadership in addressing their mental health concerns and to encourage behaviours that promote help-seeking for themselves and for people within their communities.

2. WHERE DID THE RESEARCH TAKE PLACE?

The research was conducted in a private school, a public school, and a community centre in British Columbia with three cohorts of youth participants of the Core Connectors Initiative.

3. WHO IS THIS RESEARCH ABOUT?

This research is about the experiences of 30 youth participants of the Core Connectors Initiative, ranging in age from 15-17-years-old. The majority of the participants were female (65.5%) and of European descent (51.7%); the remainder of participants were either of Asian descent (41.4%) or another background (6.9%).

4. HOW WAS THE RESEARCH DONE?

The Core Connectors Initiative program consisted of two phases – a **training phase** and an **action phase**. Only the training phase was examined in this study.

During the training phase, youth participants met once a week for 14 weeks. During each 1.5-hour training session, led by facilitators from the program, participants would go over one of 14 learning modules, which discussed the following topics:

- i. Understanding Mental Health and Stigma
- ii. Peer Support Skills
- iii. Mapping Local Support Networks
- iv. Managing Stress
- v. Suicide Prevention
- vi. Positive Mental Health and Resilience

At the beginning and end of the training phase, *quantitative data* (that can be counted or compared as numbers) was collected from youth participants through the following measures:

- a **General Help-Seeking Questionnaire** that asked participants about their likelihood to seek help for their personal and emotional challenges;
- a **Social Connectedness Scale** asking youth about how connected they felt to their social environment; and
- a **Positive Youth Development Inventory** that asked participants to rate their agreement to statements about their participation in the program.

Qualitative data (describing qualities, characteristics, processes or experiences) was also collected from youth participants at the end of the training phases through **one-on-one interviews** that asked participants what they found helpful or unhelpful about the program.

Although not included in this study, the action phase gave youth participants the opportunity to form localized teams to advocate for mental health and provide peer support under the guidance of two facilitators who specialized in counselling.

5. WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

As a result of their participation in the Core Connectors Initiative program, **youth became more likely to seek help overall for personal mental health issues and for suicidal ideation**. Researchers determined that the Core Connectors Initiative was beneficial for participants, specifically in their learning of peer support skills and engaging with content determined to be meaningful.

Participants shared that they found 131 training moments helpful (54.4%) and 69 moments unhelpful or hindering (28.6%), as well as 41 hopes for the program (17.0%).

Participants reported that the Core Connectors Initiative program could be improved by including more opportunities for connection between youth learners. Some participants reported feeling disengaged or uncomfortable during silences and having fears of being judged. Participants found that **the training was more helpful when they learned skills relevant to their own lived experiences rather than based on the curriculum alone**. Participants also reported that they would like more clarity about what to expect from the program, as its approach to mental health literacy was not one with which they were familiar – many expected the program to simply involve learning strategies rather than having them take critical and personal approaches to different mental health strategies.

6. WHY DOES THIS RESEARCH MATTER FOR YOUTH WORK?

The results of the research can support youth workers and organizations in implementing impactful mental health programs for youth through the use of effective mental health literacy strategies.

Mental health literacy has been shown to be effective in giving youth the tools and the knowledge to seek help for themselves and for their peers' mental wellness. However, based on the results of the Core Connectors Initiative program, this work would be even more effective if it **includes clearly defined program objectives, is centered around young people's personal experiences, and is focused on the social connectedness between participants**.



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