

Visioning Transformative Youth Work

Design Day Story



YOUTHREX
Research &
Evaluation eXchange

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Abstract

YouthREX's Collaborative Design Day on September 6th, 2023, brought together youth sector stakeholders in Ontario to explore the joys, challenges, and tensions of youth work.

Through storytelling and design thinking principles, we worked together to collaboratively craft a vision for creative and viable forms of transformative youth work practices.

The event was hosted in partnership with the York Research Chair in Youth and Contexts of Inequity, held by Dr. Uzo Anucha. We were joined by Special Guest Dr. Tania de St Croix, renowned critical youth studies and youth work scholar, author, former youth worker, and professor at King's College London.

This report summarizes key takeaways from the day's conversations, and actions that can be applied directly to youth work policy and practice.

About the Collaborative Design Day

Overview

Too often youth workers operate in silos, or our engagement is confined within our roles and organizations. YouthREX's Collaborative Design Day enabled youth sector stakeholders to come together and foster community, connection, and dialogue.

Together with our Special Guest – [Dr. Tania de St Croix](#) – we explored the joys, challenges, and tensions of youth work. Our questions were shaped by our shared experiences:

What fuels our practice, and what are the barriers?

Where are there spaces for resistance and collective action?

How might we design youth sector services, programs, and opportunities to challenge systemic barriers to inclusion and critically embrace intersectionality?

How can we rethink the impact of youth work?

The goals of the Design Day were to:



Foster an open and honest conversation about the joys, challenges, and tensions of youth work.



Connect with other youth workers and youth sector stakeholders in a collaborative and supportive atmosphere.



Take active steps towards solving pressing challenges in the youth sector.



Listen to and learn from experts in the field.

Participants

We thank all participants for making the Design Day such a success:

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Visioning Transformative Youth
Celebrating, Reflecting, Resisting



PART A

Keynote Presentations

Keynote Presentations

Dr. Tania de St Croix and Dr. Uzo Anucha presented insights from research with and about youth and youth workers.

Check out the five key takeaways from each presentation below:

TAKE 5

[Visioning Transformative Youth Work](#)
[Celebrating, Reflecting, Resisting](#)

TAKE 5

[Visioning Transformative Youth Work](#)
[Insights from the Ontario Youth Sector Study](#)





PART B

Ideas Labs



Background

The goal of the Ideas Labs was to have participants collaborate with their peers to develop a shared understanding of issues and challenges in Ontario’s youth sector, and to co-create recommendations for moving forward. This was a chance for youth workers to gather, think, and talk about solutions to some of the most difficult aspects of their work.

The Ideas Labs were structured using **Human-Centered Design Thinking** principles:



Understanding core problems

What issues lie at the heart of youth work in Ontario? Who do these issues affect? Who could help change these issues?



Using a people-centered approach

How do the people in the room affect the solutions we generate? In what ways can we leverage the unique talents and experiences of individuals to answer larger questions?



Employing rapid ideation and prototyping

What kind of solutions can we generate when we are only bound by our imaginations?

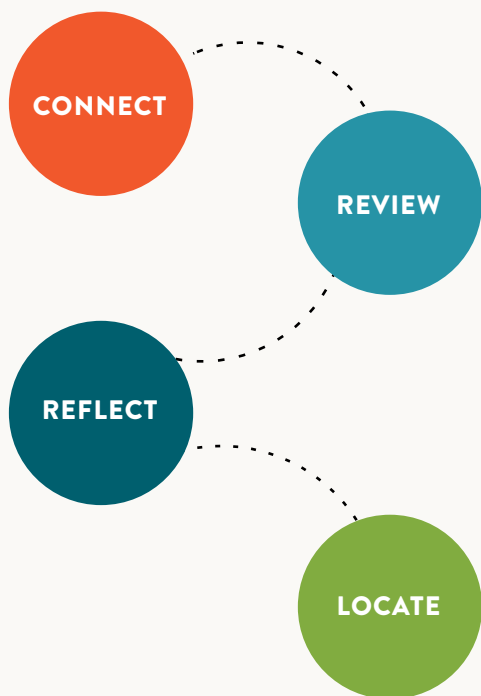


Searching for activity-centered solutions

How can we make sure our solutions are action-based and delivered to meet actual needs?

With these four principles in mind, the Ideas Labs were structured into three periods of brainstorming and discussion:

1. Storytelling



Members from each Ideas Lab:

- Connected with group members;
- Reviewed and reflected on presentations;
- Located themselves and shared stories from personal and professional experiences connected to youth work; and
- Reflected on the connections between their stories and broader political and institutional contexts.

Each of the six Ideas Labs was asked to come up with a *grounding focus* that would centre their discussions:

Ideas Lab 1

Responsible Funding and Empowering Youth Decision-Makers

Ideas Lab 2

Sustainable Youth Development

Ideas Lab 3

Towards a Youth-Centric Youth Sector

Ideas Lab 4

Youth-Initiated Navigation in Education and Training

Ideas Lab 5

Sustainable Funding, Sustained Networking

Ideas Lab 6

Youth System Navigation

Although the topics varied, key themes like **funding**, **sustainability**, and promoting **youth autonomy** were raised in nearly every discussion.



2. Human-Centered Design Thinking: Pose How Might We (HMW) Questions

Each group posed the following HMW questions about the selected theme/issue:



How Might We Create/Remix?

- What things (programs, policies, etc.) that do not currently exist should be created to fulfill your vision?
- What 'old' things can be combined, stretched, amplified, and/or transformed from the approaches we have now?

How Might We Acknowledge?

- Notice existing energy around your theme – how are young people already taking action on this issue?

How Might We Expand?

- Where are the sparks of possibility to enhance and amplify our opportunities and processes?

How Might We Strategize/Equitize?

- What can we do to make the space more equitable? What kind of strategies can we employ now to kick-start this process?

3. Vision Transformative Youth Work: Strategize – Equitize

After asking the How Might We questions, each group was asked to:

- Imagine new realities and consider one major action;
- Strategize and organize steps to achieve their action;
- Ground their action on a commitment to challenge systemic barriers to inclusion and critically embrace intersectionality; and
- Design an initial call to action.



One of the most important questions posed to participants at the Design Day was:

What is the one simple thing we can all do to move towards this major action?

The purpose behind this question is to break down daunting, seemingly unachievable goals into smaller, more actionable tasks. As tasks become smaller, so, too, do the resources needed to achieve those tasks – and, as time goes on, the rapid progress made on smaller tasks often amounts to far greater progress on the goal overall. The ‘One Simple Thing’ question uses the fourth principle of Human-Centered Design Thinking – encouraging participants to search for ***activity-centered solutions*** to large problems.



PART C

Discussions and Transformative Youth Work Practice Strategies

In response to the discussion prompts, each group outlined actionable strategies for effecting change on their area of focus:

Responsible Funding and Empowering Youth Decision-Makers

How Might We Create/Remix?

Increase funding for program staff salaries, benefits, and vacations to improve staff retention and reinforce positive work environments.

For funders: ask those on the ground what is actually feasible, realistic, and/or relevant for funding requirements and allocation.

→ This includes more funding for educational and professional development opportunities in the sector for both youth workers and youth, and increased funds for mobile mental health services (i.e. texting helplines).

For youth-serving organizations: give funders a better idea of the day-to-day practices of programs and youth workers to improve funding outcomes.

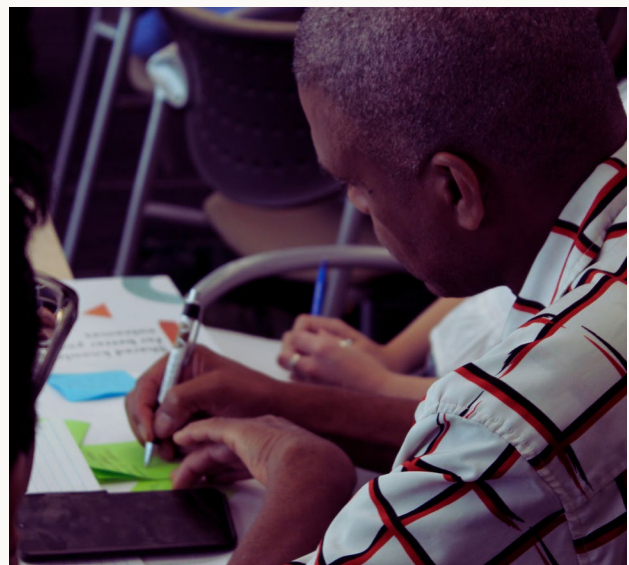
→ This would not only better contextualize future funding decisions, but might also encourage a more empathetic relationship between funders and youth organizations

For youth-serving organizations: build better awareness of programs in the community to increase funding opportunities and possible donations.

How Might We Expand?

Ensure more inter-agency or inter-organizational collaboration to share funding and avoid redundancies across all types of organizations.

→ Funders should be added to these collaboration conversations, both to improve their understanding of what different organizations offer and to help organizations understand what funders are looking for.



How Might We Acknowledge?

Involve youth in these conversations and in collaborations between organizations and funders (e.g. youth advisory councils or youth-focused conferences).

- Young people have valuable contributions and unique insights into the needs of their peers and speak from a truly authentic perspective.

How Might We Strategize/Equitize?

Encourage the development of a collaborative youth work collective to promote networking, sharing of success stories, and interaction between multiple stakeholders in the youth-serving sector (e.g. youth, youth workers, funders).

- The collective would have to include stakeholders from all different backgrounds to achieve representation (youth workers from a wide variety of programs, funders, and young people).



ONE SIMPLE THING

Start a conversation!

Simply giving youth sector stakeholders the opportunity to voice concerns and share their struggles with finding or maintaining funding empowers those stakeholders to actively advocate for their needs.

Sustainable Youth Development

How Might We Create/Remix?

Increase opportunities for youth employment services/programs beyond the summer months.

- Youth are thrown into jobs that often don't solve any of their economic issues and are left with nowhere to turn once the summer job program ends.
- Long-term programs that address professional development and a young person's career after the program ends is a more sustainable, effective way of employing and empowering youth. This includes following up with youth after programs to attend to challenges and/or unmet needs.

Encourage teachers, employers, and institutions to uplift youth and set high expectations that youth can internalize.

Premise funding requirements for employment services/programs on benchmarks that are achievable, empathic, and attainable, especially for programs that are working to combat systemic inequities.

- Specific and restrictive funding requirements create unrealistic expectations for youth and youth workers, who have to battle systemic barriers like poverty, inequality, or racism.

Ensure that evaluation requirements capture the intangible impacts of youth work; appreciating the deeper, qualitative effects of positive youth work should be worth as much as the quantitative effects.

How Might We Expand?

Start programs for youth earlier and employ a more holistic approach (i.e. by offering wrap around supports that incorporate elements of youth work into a young person's home, school, and community).

Offer transportation options (i.e. covering the cost of transit fares) for youth to get to programs.

- Transportation is an often overlooked barrier that can dramatically impact a young person's ability to attend and take full advantage of youth programs.

Provide volunteer opportunities for youth, which can be used for networking.

Ensure there are multilingual social service representatives.

- Language, specifically the hegemonic use of English, is another overlooked barrier that can have a major impact on the ability of newcomer or other underserved youth to access programs. Hiring multilingual social service representatives can help bridge language gaps between non-English speaking youth and predominantly English-speaking programs.

How Might We Acknowledge?

Follow up with youth after programs end to address any challenges and/or unmet needs.

Emphasize long-term relationships between programs and participants, especially when those programs are focused on skills development or employment.

Provide more opportunities for youth to provide feedback and participate in the generative processes of program design and development.

How Might We Strategize/Equitize?

Help youth transition out of programs with sustainable skills that continue to develop over time.

Provide youth workers and youth enrolled in employment programs with a basic income that is also a livable wage.

Increase employment programs for youth with diverse educational backgrounds.

→ This includes those with conventional four-year college/university degrees, as well as those with credentials from trade schools and diploma or certificate programs. There is a general belief in the supremacy of four-year degrees over trades programs, but this can be an oppressive narrative for young people who may not want or be interested in the structure of conventional post-secondary degrees.

Offer wrap around services that consider a variety of needs – everything from offering food to demonstrating how to write a resume, for example. Prioritize youth programs that comprehensively improve a participant's outcomes.



ONE SIMPLE THING

Advocate for a universal basic living wage!

If the youth sector comes together to advocate for a universal basic living wage policy, it can apply the necessary pressure on government to develop new legislation.

Universal basic living wages would improve the livelihoods of youth workers, but, perhaps more importantly, they could also improve the lives of young people who are just starting their career journeys and are moving to large, expensive urban centres to find work.

Towards a Youth-Centric Youth Sector

How Might We Create/Remix?

Encourage social and community organizations for young people.

- This includes promoting youth-led communities (youth councils, youth-led youth groups, etc.) and opportunities for young people to gather, connect, and lead on their own terms.

Build strong connections with schools.

There should be a strengthening of ties between youth groups, youth, and schools. Youth groups could go directly to schools to design programs with youth and increase youth involvement in school curricula design.

For youth organizations: pursue collaboration instead of competition.

- Scarce funding creates competition and harms the youth sector. It also reduces the possibility of wrap around programming by isolating programs that might work in tandem with one another to improve outcomes.

Consider the experiences of newcomers who are unfamiliar with the youth sector. How can we make sure that the benefits of engagement in youth programs are communicated clearly and effectively?

Approach youth work with young people's interests in mind, especially using relevant media to engage with young audiences (TikTok, Instagram, etc.).

- The idea is to 'meet youth where they're at' rather than forcing young people to be in environments that they are unfamiliar with or uncomfortable in. Engaging with young people on the platforms where they socialize and build connections is another important avenue to increase participation in youth programming.

How Might We Expand?

Offer family supports to take the burden off youth to earn an income.

- Although youth should be encouraged to develop skills that will later contribute to their financial wellbeing, youth should not need to work to support themselves or their families while they are developing these skills. Increasing the availability of family funding would lessen the burden on young people to contribute financially to their households.

Provide post-high school youth programming.

→ So much youth programming ends when young people graduate high school, despite the fact that the term ‘youth’ still applies to people in their 20s. There should be a greater emphasis on reaching young people once they’ve graduated from high school and are actively transitioning into further education, careers, and the wider adult world.

How Might We Acknowledge?

Recognize youth contributions. Young people are often expected to ‘save the world’ without having the institutional power to do so, so acknowledge youth participants as co-creators who can actively improve programming.

→ Young people are already shouldering much of the burden of having to ‘fix’ their own problems and advocate for their own needs. While it is important to give youth the freedom and encouragement to self-advocate, youth programs should be sensitive to the fact that many young people are burnt out from the stresses of their advocacy work. Acknowledge and appreciate the work that young people contribute to their communities and to youth programs.

How Might We Strategize/Equitize?

Go to schools and consult with youth to develop programming.

→ Invite youth to participate from the beginning: target a particular area or neighbourhood where youth programs might be especially valuable and encourage young people there to contribute to the development of the program.

Activate libraries for outreach and encourage in-person meetings that allow for greater connection.

→ Libraries can be a powerful tool to connect with youth and their communities in spaces that are free and open to all. Libraries also have resources that are widely available in most communities yet often underused, including youth clubs, career advisors, literacy teachers, and other specialist learning tools that are available to all patrons.

Put less emphasis on intangibles and external metrics, and instead refocus on experiential metrics. Shift the mindset from quantitative to qualitative measurements of youth outcomes.

ONE SIMPLE THING

Invite young people to the table!

Place special emphasis on activating young people in spaces where youth currently gather (schools, libraries, sports facilities, online, etc.) as part of an outreach strategy.

Youth-Initiated Navigation in Education and Training

How Might We Create/Remix:

Actively listen to youth experiences with both systemic and personal/interpersonal challenges.

Assess the over-burdening of young people in educational settings.

- If we are constantly adding criteria for students in schools, we need to talk about what to take out of the system so as not over-burden students. Young people should be actively involved in determining what it is they feel is no longer serving their best interests.

Recognize that students' identities are intersectional; challenges may be compounded for youth who are in school but also newcomers, low-income, etc., and this might affect their learning types and styles.

- Wrap around supports tailored to youth's needs and intersectional identities are critical and dependent on programs collaborating to address the various components and areas of need in a young person's life; no one youth program is able to facilitate that kind of comprehensive support.

How Might We Expand:

Re-examine conventional approaches to education, especially when it comes to innovations like micro-credentialling.

- Not all students want or even benefit from traditional four-year post-secondary programs, and presenting alternative options empowers young people to choose what best suits their needs.

Create space for autonomy, self-reliance, and self-initiated learning in curricula from a young age.

- Children and pre-teens should be learning about how they can become independent adults and about the value of life-long learning.

Imagine how to introduce discussions about love into schools.

- Although perceived as a taboo subject, there are many ways to speak about love that are within the bounds of what is considered an acceptable relationship between student/teacher and young person/youth worker.
- So much of youth work is dependent on love, and young people are especially in need of hearing that they are loved and valued; once they know this, outcomes like increased confidence and self-reliance become more readily achievable.

How Might We Acknowledge:

Empower youth to make choices and develop their own agendas.

- Offer space for young people to explore their autonomy in a way that feels genuine and authentic rather than patronizing. Youth councils, youth-run groups, and youth-centred spaces all allow for this kind of genuine youth empowerment.

Remember: *“Nothing about us without us!”*

- No decisions about youth should be made without the consultation of young people. Youth councils and youth advisory committees work towards meaningful engagement and active policy change.

How Might We Strategize/Equitize:

Teach young people how to self-advocate by allowing them opportunities to lead from an early age.

Enable youth to define what a ‘safe’ space means/ requires.

Facilitate opportunities for the education system to work in concert with community organizations.

- Educational policies that are politicized and follow political trends very often fail students.



ONE SIMPLE THING

Teach young people how to self-advocate and create youth-defined safe spaces!

No decisions about young people should be made without the consultation of young people. Providing opportunities for youth councils and youth advisory committees is important to effect policy change.

Sustainable Funding, Sustained Networking

How Might We Create/Remix:

Create a network that links youth organizations, youth workers, and young people. Facilitate regular meetings, conferences, and possibly even an online platform where key stakeholders could share knowledge, ideas, and opportunities for those in the youth sector.

Challenge power relations by designing a youth-led collective space for learning between youth, youth workers, and funders. This would be led from a bottom-up approach that emphasizes the voices of young people and the development of lasting partnerships.

- Engage partner agencies and external supports (like YouthREX) to help youth build their capacity. This would enable funders to hear directly from those receiving services.



How Might We Expand:

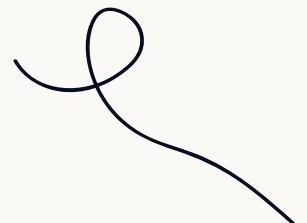
Collaborate and build partnerships between youth, youth workers, other stakeholders, and funders.

- A formal network extends the idea of increased collaboration and the creation of stronger partnerships in the sector.

How Might We Acknowledge:

Facilitate empathy across stakeholders, especially from funders towards youth organizations.

- Funders should be more flexible with their requirements to meet the unique needs of individual youth programs. Requesting more funding is always a huge ask, even from well-funded projects, and inaccessible tools are often used to report the status of an organization's key benchmarks. Organizations are burnt out!



How Might We Strategize/Equitize:

Develop peer-led approaches to evaluation that rely on youth responses and networking between youth organizations.

- Teach civic engagement and invite youth to co-create evaluation tools.
- Give youth workers the opportunity to coach funders on how to recreate their funding models to build ones that are truly empathetic to the unique needs of particular youth and youth programs.

Advocate for longer-term grants with more generalized evaluation requirements that rely less on quantitative indicators of a program's success.

Remove the bias from funding decisions.

- Funding is easily influenced by interpersonal relationships between funders and leadership in the organization. Encourage a more equitable way of applying for and receiving funds that minimizes the possibility of interpersonal biases and nepotism.



ONE SIMPLE THING

Establish a Sustainable Funding Conference and develop a Youth Worker Network!

Invite youth, funders, and youth workers together to facilitate youth-led teaching and conversations. This could be an opportunity for funders to learn what is needed from youth's perspectives.

Youth System Navigation

How Might We Create/Remix:

Introduce programs that mentor youth to maneuver through the youth sector and systems.

- Youth have knowledge and should be encouraged to share that knowledge with peers. Introduce a peer-mentorship program that encourages other youth to get involved through mentors who have lived experience.

How Might We Expand:

Equip the families of young people with knowledge of how to effectively leverage the youth sector to support the best possible outcomes for their children.

- Educate families on their rights, how to navigate systems, and policies that might directly affect them and their children. Again, this could be designed as a peer-mentoring model, wherein families who have previous experience with the youth sector would guide those unfamiliar.

Know, navigate, transform!

- Education is at the heart of effective youth work and must be implemented into transformative policies. Education should be more widely available for youth, youth workers, and the families of youth.

Establish programs with a critical lens towards anti-racism and anti-oppression.

How Might We Acknowledge:

Appreciate and leverage the knowledge of young people.

- Youth have lived experience and ways of knowing that can provide incredible value to other young people. Allowing them the opportunity to speak about their experiences and share knowledge with their peers through a multi-directional mentoring model could provide the best possible platform for young mentors to educate others.

How Might We Strategize/Equitize:

Recognize and name systemic oppression.

- Acknowledge systems that are currently and historically oppressive and actively work to find solutions to those oppressive structures. This should include regular discussions within youth organizations to address systemic inequalities and barriers, as well as consulting with young people to learn from their experiences and the kinds of anti-oppressive practices that resonate.
- Take power from oppressive institutions and give it to youth and families. Education, bottom-up learning, and grassroots mentorship within communities and within youth organizations is the best way to achieve this goal.



ONE SIMPLE THING

Find allies within the existing system!

Seek out and leverage connections within the system that are understanding of the need for youth-led navigation and invite them to join a network of supporters.

What is the one simple thing we can all do to move towards major action?

IDEAS LAB FOCUS

ONE SIMPLE THING

1 Responsible Funding and Empowering Youth Decision-Makers	~~~~~	Start a conversation.
2 Sustainable Youth Development	~~~~~	Advocate for a universal basic living wage.
3 Towards a Youth-Centric Youth Sector	~~~~~	Invite young people to the table.
4 Youth-Initiated Navigation in Education and Training	~~~~~	Teach young people how to self-advocate and create youth-defined safe spaces.
5 Sustainable Funding, Sustained Networking	~~~~~	Establish a Sustainable Funding Conference and develop a Youth Worker Network.
6 Youth System Navigation	~~~~~	Find allies within the existing system.



PART D

Questions for Youth Program Funders

The Design Day ended with one final exercise: Given the gaps that often exist between youth/ youth workers and funders, participants were asked to share the questions and concerns they would most want to raise to youth program funders.

The following day, YouthREX co-hosted a thought leadership forum for funders in partnership with the Youth Opportunities Fund at Ontario Trillium Foundation – Rethinking Impact: Evaluation and Accountability. This invitation-only event brought together youth sector funders, executive directors, senior policymakers, social innovators, and Special Guest Dr. Tania de St Croix to explore how the youth sector could collaboratively design ways of understanding the long-term impacts of their work with young people.

At the end of the session, we shared the questions that youth workers had asked the previous day, encouraging discussion on the themes and larger questions that these concerns highlight. Below are some of those questions:



How can we fund supports for youth to know, navigate, and transform the system?

How might we consider newcomer youth without status or who are temporary residents?

Are you [as a youth program funder] able to attend a youth program session?

What aspect of your work are you currently decolonizing to ensure it is anti-oppressive for service users and service workers?

What needs to be done to allow for consistent funding for youth programs?

How can you ensure that there is stable funding without any drastic disruption or interruption in the future?

How can you give organizations flexibility with the funding they receive so that youth do not face the burden of accomplishing outcomes for funders rather than for themselves?



PART E

Feedback from Design Day Participants

Participants were asked to share feedback across three categories of questions:

01. SEED

What idea has been planted in you?



How did ideas discussed at the Design Day resonate with participants or their work? What stuck out to them?



A number of participants said that they were thinking more about **how they could incorporate different types of programming** into their youth work, for example:

- “non-programming activities” that give youth the space and time to play on their own or with others, to talk, or to simply ‘hang out’ without the pressure to meet certain program goals or targets;
- a “heavy focus on helping build life skills in youth especially newcomer/immigrant youth” with programs that promote “self-advocacy [and] conflict resolution”;
- encouraging “creative and innovative thinking” that directly involves youth;
- “amplify the need for autonomy for youth” by actively involving them in “program design and all the works”; and
- more “youth-led sustainable funding” that directly centres youth in decision-making.

As well as thinking about the ways that they might change the types of programs they offer — and how they consult youth on implementing those programs — participants were also thinking about **how they might change their approach to evaluation:**

- One participant mentioned that the Design Day reinforced how important it is to be “cognizant of how evaluation is done when it comes to evaluation programs,” the idea of which another participant credited to Tania, who “reframed evaluation from the lens of youth and youth workers.”
- While program evaluation can be contentious, one participant said that the Design Day made them think more about how they should both “evaluate programs and oneself in working with youth,” reiterating the importance of knowing your own needs, abilities, experiences, and challenges when engaging with youth work and how those might be affecting your relationship with youth participants.

The most common ‘seed’ planted in the minds of Design Day participants was that of increased collaboration. An emphasis on the **“importance of partnership”** in youth work was echoed by a number of participants:

- One respondent said they would actively work towards sparking “conversation on a collaborative approach with agencies and other youth workers.”
- Another reflected on how increased collaboration could help address some of the most pressing issues in the youth sector, saying that “perhaps systemic changes and barriers can change in some ways if we are more open to conversation and talking to one another.” The idea that communication between youth organizations might improve youth outcomes was also mirrored by another participant, who said that “youth work challenges can be addressed through cooperative work with various community partners.”

**“Amplify
the need for
autonomy for
youth”**

02. BLOOMING

What idea is coming alive for you?

How did examples shared at the Design Day – either from the keynote speakers or from peers – inspire participants to action?



A number of participants mentioned that they were beginning to rethink the ways in which they and youth program participants engaged with the practice of youth work:

- Many mentioned their interest in increasing youth involvement in evaluation and program development, including “having youth co-design evaluations” and introducing more “youth-led programming.”

Participants were thinking about how they might continue the practice of cross-organizational collaboration, as modeled by the Design Day, in their everyday work:

- A number noted the importance of this kind of collaboration, saying that youth workers should “make connections with local organizations, but also regional” and that “information sharing with colleagues from outside [their] region” made youth programs stronger.

- There was a feeling among some participants that if youth workers and community organizations could “come together and put their energies into developing a sustainable plan for continued youth engagement in various spaces and sectors” there might be better outcomes for youth in youth programs.


Participants were also thinking about how increased collaboration between youth organizations could improve outcomes for youth:

- One participant spoke to the importance of having intersectional youth programs that cater to a wide variety of needs and identities if we want to “create a diverse and safe spaces for youth”. Another mentioned how youth programs need to “work as a community to create [spaces] for youth to thrive in,” highlighting the continued need for network-building to provide wrap around supports for young people.

Inspired by ideas shared in both keynote presentations, participants were already questioning how they engage with conventional methods of evaluation:

- Participants were critical of evaluation, with some asking how they could possibly “measure the success of [their] services” when the outcomes were often intangible or unquantifiable.
- Others were questioning the “level of evaluation [that] is necessary” to conduct an effective youth program, and how they might reassess the ways that evaluation hinders rather than helps their work.

Despite the challenges, many participants shared that they felt excited about the future of their work – which comes from the passion of youth workers who deeply care about and love their work. As one participant described: “There are many who love youth. There is so much potential.”

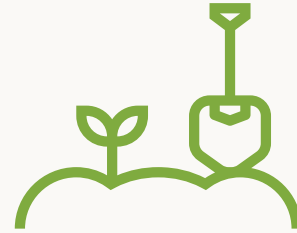


*“There are many
who love youth.
There is so much
potential.”*

03. COMPOSTING

What old idea is being transformed for you?

How did the Design Day begin to shift participants' perspectives on long-held ideas or beliefs? How are their opinions changing?



How did the Design Day begin to shift participants' perspectives on long-held ideas or beliefs? How are their opinions changing?

Participants were inspired by a few key themes and actions:

- Working towards sustainability, especially how to achieve a sustainable flow of funding into youth programs.
- Practicing “nothing about us without us!”
- Persisting with an unwillingness to address youth work with a “saviour mindset”; instead, working to promote the voices of youth through direct consultation, whether through youth councils, roundtables, voting, direct feedback forms, or any other method that centres the voices of youth in discussions on programs that affect their lives.
- Ensuring that conversations in the youth sector are “initiated horizontally and vertically in an open and non-defensive space.” This means making space for more youth worker discussions that centre shared experiences and challenges in a way that feels authentic and safe for participants. It also means involving more funders, senior youth workers, or mentors in discussions.
- Encouraging healthy boundaries in the youth work sector. Participants spoke about the importance of “doing work collaboratively while also focusing on your own passions.” This refers back to the conversation that Ideas Lab 4 had on bringing the language of love into youth work, and how we can start promoting healthy relationships between youth workers and youth to reduce burnout.

- Exploring the whys and hows behind evaluation, which included ideas shared in Tania’s presentation, in which she described the processes and challenges of securing funding and suggested new alternatives to evaluation that specifically engage youth.

The feedback form ended with a general question asking participants whether or not they thought the Design Day was relevant to their work with youth, and whether there was anything YouthREX could have done differently or might change/include in the future:

- A number of participants noted that a greater emphasis on the methodology and “more tangible takeaways” from the research shared during the keynote presentations would have been useful for their work.
- One suggested that each participant could bring an initiative that they want to develop in their youth program and work through the implementation process with the larger group.
- Many participants appreciated the Design Day’s collaborative atmosphere and the group-led discussions during the Ideas Labs. One respondent even said that “the overall conversation that arose during the group work exemplifies why we work with youth.”

“Nothing about us, without us!”

“Perhaps systemic changes and barriers can change in some ways if we are more open to conversation and talking to one another.”



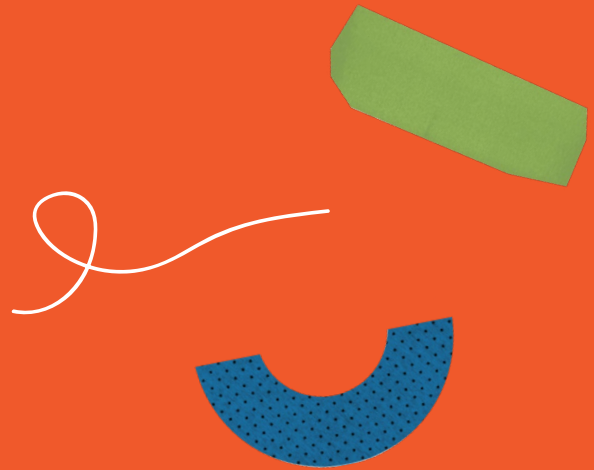
Conclusion

From discussions on how to practice self-care to creative sustainability practices, from challenging current systems of program evaluation to how we might incorporate the language of love into our work, the Collaborative Design Day was an opportunity for youth workers to hear from one another and to discuss pressing issues in the sector with their peers. Many of the conversations were inspired by Dr. Tania de St. Croix's presentation on open youth work and forms of resistance against restrictive evaluation practices. Others were focused on the takeaways shared by Dr. Uzo Anucha in her presentation on the Ontario Youth Sector Compass research project and what it means to truly thrive as youth and as youth workers.



Perhaps the most important takeaway from the Design Day, however, was that youth workers are excited about working together. We heard repeatedly throughout the Ideas Labs discussions and in feedback from participants that many want to gather, share ideas, and collaborate with other youth workers, organizations, and funders in ways that haven't previously been explored. Siloing youth organizations and forcing them to compete for scarce funding is, as many participants suggested, a contributing factor to many of the challenges youth workers face. Cross-organizational collaboration, on the other hand, supports youth workers to develop their skills and share solutions to common problems, organizations to think creatively about how to expand their programs, and youth who rely on those programs to access the support and resources they need to thrive. As one participant suggested, "perhaps systemic changes and barriers can change in some ways if we are more open to conversation and talking to one another."

Youth workers across the sector are calling for more consistent forms of collaboration that place an emphasis on network-building, knowledge-sharing, and communication. While the Design Day offered such an opportunity, it was only the beginning of a conversation that extends far beyond a single day or event.



OUR VISION is an Ontario where shared knowledge is transformed into positive impact for all youth!

OUR MISSION is to make research evidence and evaluation practices accessible and relevant to Ontario's grassroots youth sector through knowledge exchange, capacity building and evaluation leadership!

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